

Stranger Things Season 2 by make-your-own-world

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Summary: My version of a Stranger Things Season 2. New experiments, old experiments, and new friends clash together. Mike x Eleven, Lucas x Max. ***CURRENTLY UNDERGOING A MAJOR REWRITE***

1. The Thing

The Thing

For Mike, Will, Dustin, and Lucas, everything was the way it had been before that fateful week—until another girl rode her skateboard into town. Well, almost the way it had been. Sometimes the other boys would catch Mike looking at the pillow fort that remained untouched, a wistful look on his face, but they all knew she was dead. She had to be. They wished she wasn't, but that was just the way it was.

They all knew better than to try and talk to him about it.

He wouldn't listen.

"Hey, Frogface, where's your girlfriend?"

Mike's jaw tightened but he ignored Troy, keeping his eyes trained firmly ahead of him at the school.

"Oh, is the freak not with you today?" Troy taunted, mock-pouting. "Come to think of it, I haven't seen her in a while. I bet she died just like Queer here—" he motioned to Will—"only she's not coming back."

Mike whirled around, and instead of cowering under Troy's menacing glare, he matched it with one of his own, and his was even more terrifying because it held pure fury.

Still, Troy kept pushing. "Where is she, then, Frogface? Is she dead?"

Mike whipped his arm back. His fist collided with Troy's face.

"Mike!" Lucas shouted, dropping his bike.

He drew his hand back again. And again. And again.

"Mike!" Dustin joined the struggle to keep Mike off Troy.

"Mike, please, stop," Will pleaded, and that was what broke through

Mike's anger.

He stepped off the whimpering Troy, breathing heavily, before picking up his bike again. When Lucas started to reach for Troy, Mike barked, "Leave him!"

They all looked at him in surprise, Lucas's hand still hovering over Troy's bloody face.

Mike's eyes narrowed. "Leave him," he growled, slowly, dangerously.

Lucas saw the girl first.

"Hey, guys," he had said, nudging Mike and tapping Will on the shoulder before pointing to a strange girl. "Does she remind you of anyone we know?"

Mike had looked up eagerly, only to see a scruffy, long-haired girl riding a skateboard to school. A car peeled away from the sidewalk, probably whoever drove her to school.

"She's not Eleven," he had said flatly. "No way Eleven's hair could have grown out that fast, and besides, she doesn't know how to ride a skateboard. I doubt she even knew what a skateboard is."

"No..." Lucas had said, frowning. "But she... she isn't a normal girl, either. She's riding a skateboard, for one. She's kind of like El in the way she's not like anyone else."

Mike rolled his eyes and returned to paging through his book and Will continued sketching. If it wasn't El then they weren't interested. Will wanted to meet the superhero and Mike wanted his best friend back. But they were more than friends. Way more. Not just puppy love, which is what his mom called it. More than that.

Lucas spoke to the girl first too.

He had been carrying a book, one of his Dungeons and Dragons books, when the long-haired girl appeared next to him, tossing her sheet of dirty blond hair behind her shoulder. "You play D&D too?"

she asked, pointing to the book. "I love that game!"

Before long, he was talking with her naturally, as if she were Mike or Will or Dustin. But she wasn't like Eleven in every other way. She knew about friends and promises and normal-people stuff. She had family and she didn't have superpowers. She dismissed the boy's feelings most of the time with a flippant laugh, but she did it in a way that wasn't (too) hurtful.

"I hate my hair," the girl—Max—was complaining one day. "It's way too long."

"Then why don't you cut it?" Will asked politely.

Max shrugged. "My brother says it makes me look cooler. He says all skateboarders have long hair."

"But it's your hair. Why don't you cut it if you don't like it?" Dustin had asked.

Max shrugged. "I don't know. If my brother likes it, then that means it's cool."

"What about your parents?" Mike had asked.

Max shrugged tersely and the subject wasn't brought up again.

The four boys still rode their bikes home from school to each other's houses, but now Max accompanied them on her skateboard. She could keep up, sometimes riding ahead of them.

Lucas could see that although he, Will, and Dustin liked Max, Mike wasn't overly fond of her, probably scared she would take Eleven's place.

"Why doesn't he like me?" Max had asked softly one night after Will had gone to use the restroom and Mike had gone upstairs for some unknown reason.

"It's... complicated," Dustin had said with a sigh. "But it's nothing personal."

"You wouldn't believe us if we told you," Lucas said.

Max raised one eyebrow coolly. "Try me."

So they did. In whispers and broken segments, Max began to get the story behind Mike's coolness, behind why the boys had no Demogorgon in their D&D set, and why there was a pillow fort, untouched, in Mike's basement, of all places. She began to figure out why she had secretly found the missing Demogorgon piece, sooty like it had been burned, and thrown behind a couch as if trying to be forgotten. She began to find out why the Chief of police would go out on Sunday nights and leave Eggos in a box and why the Chief had made her promise not to tell the boys. She began to figure out why Mike would sometimes cradle a box of Eggos, a pair of sweatpants, and a radio when he was having an especially hard day.

At first she'd laughed in their faces. "Nice try, guys," she'd snorted. "If you don't want to tell me, that's cool, I guess."

"We're not lying!" Dustin exclaimed.

Max looked inbetween the two serious faces, disbelief slowly melting off her features. "You guys're serious?"

One day Mike came home in tears.

"What's wrong?" Max had asked, instantly switching from 'tough skateboarder' to 'compassionate friend'.

"They left," Mike hiccupped. "They closed down the facility and *left*. They locked the doors and *left*."

The other three boys exchanged glances.

"I saw that man—her Papa—he just went and *left*. Like she didn't matter at all."

The next year at school the boys had the misfortunate of having their science class in the same room where—it happened.

Mike walked into the room and stood stock-still, his eyes unblinking, his face white.

"Is this some kind of fucking joke?" Dustin had whispered when he and Mike were put at the table they had put El on when she was too weak to walk.

Mike hadn't responded.

Now, as crazy as it was, even with Mr. Clarke teaching their science class, it was their least favorite class. Sometimes Mr. Clarke would wonder why the four boys who so loved science seemed to hate the class. Why did Mike stop every time he walked in and look like he was almost *crying*?

Whenever Mr. Clarke rolled up a poster, Mike would inhale and look away quickly, not being able to bear looking at the spot on the wall where—it had happened.

Sometimes Mike would touch the place his spine had hit the wall when Eleven had shoved him backwards. The bruise had long since faded, but the memories hadn't.

Sometimes when he rode his bike he could almost feel her arms around his waist.

Whenever he had to swerve in the road for a coming car he would instinctively assume it was the bad men and Eleven was going to flip the van again.

Sometimes when all four boys rode, Dustin and Lucas would look over at Mike, expecting to see a frail figure in a pink dress hugging him close.

Sometimes Mike would wake in the middle of the night sobbing because he had just seen Eleven disappear again. Whenever that happened Nancy would be there, whispering quiet words of comfort until he fell asleep again.

Whenever it snowed Nancy and Will refused to play outside.

Sometimes Mike could almost see something flash in the corner of his

eyes, and his heart would leap, but when he turned there wouldn't be anything there and his heart would sink even lower than it had been before.

Sometimes, on the really bad days, the other three boys and Max would come down into Mike's basement to see him screaming "Eleven! Eleven, can you hear me?" into his SuperComm. They would stand, silent, as he would punch and rage and kick everything except for the precious pillow fort when she wouldn't answer, because they all knew, but he didn't, that she was dead and she couldn't hear him and she wasn't coming back.

They would all creep back to the door and close it with a snap to let him know they were there, and the screaming and frustrated sounds would stop suddenly, and when they came down and asked him what had happened, he would say unblushingly, "I think Holly had one of her friends over today," and shrug and his friends would pretend to believe it. Then Mike would go upstairs to put medicine and a Band-Aid on his bruised and bleeding knuckles his friends pretended not to notice and when he came back down he would be Mike again, cheerful and friendly and their expert Dungeon Master.

Mike knew they didn't believe it, but lying was still easier than the truth. If he lied to himself and said Eleven was alive, she was coming back, safe and sound, then for a few days he could search for her without feeling angry—at himself, at the Demogorgon, at Will, at even Eleven herself, for saying she was going to the Snow Ball with him and then going and fucking *dying*.

Sometimes he would catch himself looking at Will, and actually thinking, *Why couldn't you have saved yourself?* And then he would catch himself and remind himself that this was one of his oldest friends, this was one of his closest friends. But he never felt sorry.

Sometimes Mike would even sprinkle blood from the meats his mom made for dinner on the ground, thinking that if the Demogorgon was attracted by blood, maybe Eleven could find him by blood as well.

The thing snarled in uncertainty. It was at war with the other mind,

the less animal one, at war whether or not to attack the Thing in front of him.

It's head drew forwards, almost a 'start' signal when it jerked backwards. Two minds controlling one thing was hard to maintain. Sometimes the other mind would disappear into the depths of It, letting It kill whatever It wanted, but sometimes, like this time, the mind would be so persistent that the first mind had no choice but retract.

The second mind pushed forwards so urgently, the body almost flickered into the second mind's form- almost, but not quite. The first mind never let go enough for that to happen. The second mind wasn't even sure what it had looked like before the Joining.

The Thing in front of It was familiar. Its voice was oddly soothing to the second mind, while the first mind hated it, hated it had been there for the Joining. The first mind was reminded of the disintegrating, the horrible screams, and the flashing small suns whenever it was near the familiar Thing in front of It.

The second mind knew instinctively that this one Thing, this precious Thing, in front of It was something to be taken care of. When It heard this Thing's voice, It thought of comfort- odd now that it was Joined forever. Normally the two minds would have converged, but something different had happened and now they were two separate minds, eternally fighting for control. In agony forever—or at least until one gave up. And neither mind was anywhere close to giving up. The first mind didn't know what comfort was, while the second only knew that it had something to do with the Thing.

The Joining had been a terribly long and painful process as the second mind had been ripped from its original body and placed in this one, as some specific things were torn from it, like why the Thing was so familiar, why it liked the sound of the Thing's strange noises. And even now, sometimes, the agony would consume the minds, and they would clash together but not quite because they had not completely Joined. It was a terrible thing to not be completely Joined.

Sometimes the second mind had a feeling that It was missing some

things from Its memory- all It could faintly picture was darkness, roaring, white walls, and hurt. But yet somehow the Thing in front of It was familiar.

The Thing moved suddenly, and It jerked backwards into the shadows. Better to stay hidden until a puncture appeared in the Thing's soft covering. Punctures signaled that the vessel was injured. The first mind would consume those vessels, but if there was a puncture in the Thing's covering, the second mind wouldn't let It consume the Thing. If that ever happened the second mind had an idea that It would be very, very angry. Very angry. It would probably eat whatever had caused the puncture. And then some.

It followed the Thing until the Thing met up with four other Things- three of them also familiar, one not. It did not like the unfamiliar one instinctively. The unfamiliar Thing smelled different from the others- a different sex, It realized.

It stifled Its growl and retreated farther into the shadows, so far it was back in Its home, where the second mind retracted for a while and tried to connect with the familiar Thing.

When the second mind could see again, It realized that It had no form. There was nothing to call its own in the black void of between Its home and the Things' home.

But yet It could see and hear, so It continued on through the nothingness until It found what It was looking for: the familiar Thing. The Thing's mouth (was it a mouth? It looked so different from Its own) opened and closed and made strange noises that It couldn't understand, yet could at the same time.

"I *swear* I saw something move," the Thing insisted, probably communicating with another Thing, though the second mind could only see the Thing. "It's skin was like... scabbing and pale..." the Thing went quiet for a while then made a few more strange noises. "If she really did die in vain... if all she did was transport it back to the Upside Down and kill herself with the effort, we'll have to finish the job. I'll make sure Eleven—"

And then It was being whisked away from the Thing, the shock of

hearing another familiar thing jolting It back to Its body.

The first mind had pushed Its way forward and was consuming another bloody Thing, one of the Things that was covered with fuzz and that had some kind of branches sticking out of its peculiarly-shaped head.

The second mind pushed farther back, ignoring the sounds the first mind made when consuming that reminded It of fear and hurt and for some reason, the familiar Thing.

As usual, when It realized that It connected fear and hurt to the Thing, It would wonder why It was so determined to protect it.

Instinct, It assumed.

Edited!

2. The Brownie

The Brownie

The dice flew through the air. It landed on the floor, spinning, before settling down on a...

"14!" Max cheered, putting her hands in the air.

Mike grinned, though Will could tell it was forced. "It staggers back, clutching a hand to its chest! It reaches out a clawed hand... and..."

"And we win," Lucas supplied dully. "Yes, we know already. Hasn't *anyone* else noticed that there are no twists in the ending? It's always 'it reaches out a clawed hand' and then Mike slumps over and we win."

"Well, would you like to lose then?" Mike asked, bristling. "I can arrange that."

"No!" Lucas snapped. "I just want you to get over what happened! It's like you care more about a *girl* than us! We've been your friends for years! You knew her for a week!"

Mike had that look on his face, the one where it was just guarded and angry. His eyes were narrowed. That was the face he had had when he had punched Troy, breaking his jaw. That was the face that made you feel like he didn't care about you, didn't care if he hurt you.

"And its clawed hand grabs for Lucas, slits his throat, and then the two bodies fall to the ground. Max the brownie, victorious, raises the Hydra's head with one hand as the army cheers in victory."

"Fuck you, Mike!" Lucas yelled, upending the board.

Mike shrugged. "I guess you should have cast a protection spell, then."

Lucas stormed off without another word.

After an awkward pause, Will and Dustin went after him.

Mike closed his eyes, ignoring the twinge in his heart as he heard his friends all leave and leaned back in his chair. Hanging his head back, he squinted one eye open and stared at the fort upside down. "I need to take that down," he said, mostly to himself.

"Why?"

Mike jumped, the legs of the chair crashing down to the floor. He had forgotten about Max.

"Never mind," he muttered.

"That was where she slept, wasn't it," Max said.

He stared at her. "How do you know about that?"

She looked down at her watch almost guiltily. "Oh, my brother's supposed to pick me up right about now. See you later!" She ran up the stairs without looking back.

Mike.

Mike jerked his head around to stare at the pillow fort. What?

Mike.

"Eleven?" he whispered, half hoping it was, half hoping it wasn't.

Mike.

Mike.

Mike.

Then suddenly there was silence.

"Eleven?" Mike yelled, out of his chair now, spinning around. "Eleven, where-"

MIKE!

"Eleven!" Mike yelled.

Mike help me!

"Where are you?"

Silence. Then sobbing.

I don't know...

Mike?

The horrible sobbing, desperate quality of her voice made Mike's chest cave into itself, face screwing up as he tried to push back the tears. The hushed whisper continued to wail for him while he yelled, spinning around, trying to see the owner.

Wrong... forget...

Silence.

FRIENDS HELP EACH OTHER! HELP ME!

Then the voice was gone. Gone like a leaf being blown by the wind.

"Eleven?" Mike sobbed. "Oh god, Eleven, we are friends, please tell me what to do, where are you, please..." The comforting feeling that he felt with Eleven's presence had been ripped away, leaving the gaping hole in his chest even more prominent.

But she didn't respond.

"ELEVEN!" Mike bellowed.

Can't remember...

Who's Eleven?

Who are you?

In the darkness, the eleventh experiment, the first one to have successful powers, watched in dismay as something, like a *memory*, somehow, floated out of her mouth. She tried in vain to catch it but she couldn't move her arms.

Looking down in frustration, she realized she didn't *have* arms. Her body was slowly dissolving, getting swallowed up by...

She screamed, the sound ripping through the nothingness and making the water on the ground explode in a blast.

"No! No! I won't go back!"

Mike screamed along with her, up until the very end until it was cut off abruptly.

Max swept back her sheet of long hair with a sigh and plopped into the passenger seat of her brother's Camaro.

"Why couldn't you spend the night over here?" Billy grumbled.

Max sighed. "Because I'm a *girl*, and my friends are all *boys*. Do you have any idea what their parents would think?"

"That you're screwing?" Billy shrugged as Max buckled her seat belt and placed her skateboard gingerly on the floor. "No biggie. I don't care."

Max crossed her arms and glared out the window as Billy started to drive. "That's 'cause you and Blossom fuck every night now."

"The hell d'you know 'bout that?" Billy growled, his eyes never leaving the road.

"You think I can't hear?" Max snorted. "Please." She didn't elaborate. After a lengthy pause, she asked, "S she here tonight too?"

"Stay out of my way and I'll stay out of yours," Billy snarled.

"So she is."

"I should have left you with-"

"Shut the fuck up." Max opened the car door while he was still driving and grimly smiled when he braked with a jerk. Smoothly, she jumped on her skateboard and rode the rest of the way home,

ignoring how her brother shot her death glares from the car.

Blossom, Billy's whore girlfriend, was waiting outside when they pulled into the driveway. She was okay, but she treated Max like a baby, and her climaxes were *way* too loud.

"Max!" she squealed, enveloping Max in a huge smothering hug. She was choking on some of her tightly curled blond hair. When she finally pulled back, she examined Max with critical blue eyes. Max had always thought those eyes were pretty, but the mascara she wore made her eyelashes look like spiders. Her hair was *too* tightly curled to be natural, and everything she wore was designed to get Billy horny.

"Blossom," Max said with far less enthusiasm. "How've you been?"

"Pretty good," Blossom giggled girlishly. "Are you... erm... spending the night here?"

"Don't worry, I've gotten used to you by now," Max assured her. "Though your orgasms are a *bit* loud. If you could tone those down a teensy bit, I might actually get some sleep tonight."

She flounced inside, leaving Billy red with rage and Blossom saying something about his '*absolutely precious* little baby sister'.

Turns out, Blossom *could* keep it down. Huh.

The next day, Max woke to an avalanche of books raining down on her face, falling from the bookshelf above her small bed.

"What the-"

Blossom and Billy were talking in hushed voices outside Max's room.

"You tell her."

"You're her sister!"

"Blossom..."

"Fine..."

Max sat up, hugging her knees to her chest as she waited for Blossom to burst into her room.

The door banged open, showing Blossom and Billy standing outside, surprised looks on their faces, Blossom's hand still reaching for the doorknob.

"Max!" Blossom quickly recovered her poise. "You'll never believe the good news!"

"I'm going to be a dad!" Billy said, almost, but not quite, beaming with pride. He settled for a slightly less angry sneer.

"You're... pregnant?" Max asked slowly, looking at the whore and her brother.

Blossom nodded, beaming.

"That's great," Max said through gritted teeth. "Really amazing."

"Isn't it though?" Blossom hugged her. "You're gonna be an aunt! You'll have to help me with the baby, because I don't know a thing about them, we can work together and go to workshops, and-" She was waving her hands around until Max noticed something completely earth-shattering. She grabbed Blossom's hand and stared at the colossal diamond ring.

"You're *engaged*?" Max spat. This was even worse than the baby! She had just been figuring they could dump it at the nearest orphanage!

Blossom nodded eagerly, her bouncy curls hitting her shoulders. "We'll be married in a month, because we don't want anyone to think the child's a bastard!"

"Even though it *is*," Max pointed out.

"But no one will know, so that's what matters!"

In the kitchen, a pile of Eggos floated in the air, only to fall back onto the plate seconds before the three walked into the kitchen.

"What will you name it?" Max asked.

"We're not sure yet," Blossom said, frowning. "If it's a boy, then probably Carter- we both like that name. If it's a girl, then-"

"Ella," Max said quietly. "El for short."

"Ella..." Blossom pondered. "That sounds nice. Okay, Ella it is!"

Max smiled weakly and glanced at Blossom's stomach. The name had popped out of her mouth without her consent, but now she wondered how the boys would react to this news- her brother was engaged to a whore, and the bastard child might be named after a mysterious psychokinetic girl that Mike was in love with. A girl that had saved all their lives. A girl that had sacrificed herself for them.

Yep, this was gonna go over well. Not.

But for some reason, this whole situation seemed like...

Oh God.

Oh fucking Lord above.

No.

No.

This was not happening.

She couldn't remember her parents all that well- just screams and curses and the sound of breaking glass, dark hair and blue eyes for her mom, sandy brown hair and green eyes for her dad, the horrible gun night, and her mother soothing her while she cried, rocking her back and forth, singing a lullaby to her.

Her dad was- well, he wasn't an alcoholic, but he wasn't all there either. The gun night was the night Billy had taken her, her only seven and him fourteen, and all she had was her dad's last gift to her, her precious skateboard, and the locket that she had ripped off her mother's cooling throat, trying not to look at the hole in her mother's chest, instinctively knowing that it was over, it was all over.

Running away probably wasn't the smartest move ever. They'd only

had their parent's credit cards and a handful of cash and change. Still, Billy had helped her, saved her, and Max knew that that old Billy was still in there somewhere.

But then when he started growing up, finding out *he* was a bastard (because their mom had been raped, and had only married Max's dad when she found out she was pregnant *again*, with Max) he changed.

And now there was another bastard, another poor child living with them, along with Billy and Max.

Max recalled all the nasty accusations that were pointed at her at her old schools, at how one bitch had called her a bastard, and she had flinched, and then her secret was out.

And then they moved. Again and again until they moved to Hawkins, where there were weird marks on the wall of one hallway, the whiteboard in her science classroom, and claw marks not made by your average bear on the gym floor. Where sometimes, if you were lucky, you would walk by that hallway and you would see a bullet imbedded in the wall that the custodians missed.

Where she had four friends who believed in monsters and superpowers and one girl everyone else presumed dead. Four kids who flinched every time they heard static on the Heathkit, who flinched whenever they walked into the science classroom, flinched when the weird marks on the wall in the science classroom were revealed, flinched when something fell to the floor. Flinched when they went to Will's house and jumped over a burn mark on the carpet, ignored an alphabet painted on the wall, and a hole in the ceiling and other wall.

With older siblings who also flinched at all those things, and that Steve guy who would actually *leap* over the burn mark on the hallway.

Max was almost *normal* compared to those kids.

Four friends who were total geeks, harmless and nice, but still idiots like Troy would flinch whenever they walked by. Four friends who would comfort each other when Will would totter out of the

bathroom looking green, four friends who would walk in and see Mike and Nancy sobbing, embracing each other as they grieved for both their lost friends.

No bodies actually, surprisingly made it harder, because Max could see Mike wanted actual *proof* she was gone, so he could move on and not be scared that the girl would come back and hate him.

Then again, he didn't *want* her to be dead. Not at all.

And out of all the grownups, only Joyce and Hopper understood. They were the only ones that the four could turn to for guidance.

Eleven stood in front of him, pressing him against the cabinet as she advanced on the Demogorgon.

But this time, he felt the weight of her pressing release against him and he scrambled forwards to grab her as the monster disintegrated. Once the ashes were gone, he was still holding Eleven.

"El," he tried to say but his mouth wouldn't work.

Then he felt like she had wrenched her hand out of his grip. Looking down, he saw that her body was disintegrating too, only more slowly.

"Mike!" Eleven screamed. "Mike, I thought we were friends! Why did you leave me?"

"I haven't left you!" Mike tried to protest. "I would never leave you!"

Her body was now just a swirling vortex of ashes, but her face remained the same.

"You left me," she said, her voice echoing as if spoken through a tunnel. "Now I'll leave you."

Her face disintegrated and she swirled away, out of the school they were at, and Mike chased after her until he woke up, cold sweat and tears on his face.

Mike.

Mike.

Mike.

"Eleven?" Mike screamed. "Where are you?"

Who are you? Who's Eleven?

Mike's door slammed open, Nancy in the doorway. Mike can't make out her exact features right now, both from his eyes, blurry from tears, and the light burning behind her head and casting his sister's face into shadows.

"Mike? Are you all right?"

"No," Mike sobbed. "I want Eleven."

Nancy hugged him and rubbed his back soothingly. "I know. I know."

Unseen by Mike, she looked at the pictures still in her hands before placing them carefully behind her—one of her and Barb, the other of the three boys as they watched Eleven be taken away by the Demogorgon's ashes.

For the first time, she was glad that the school had security cameras.

She frowned, looking at it closer. Were those... two blue lights, clashing together? What were those doing in the middle of an ash cloud?

Edited!

3. The Cherry

The Cherry

"What are you doing?" Steve appeared in the doorway. He had long since learned not to be jealous when Nancy and Jonathan were alone—they weren't doing anything; he knew Nancy wouldn't cheat on him, and he knew that they shared a special bond that not even he could understand, though he had fought the Demogorgon with them.

Nancy and Jonathan's heads jerked up. "Nothing," they said in unison.

Steve shrugged. "Really? It seems all your clothes are still on..."

Nancy got up and whacked his arm playfully. "Stop it, Steve Herrington," she playfully scolded him, standing in tiptoe to peck his cheek. Then her face sobered. "We're just looking at something."

"Can I see?" Steve held out a hand.

Jonathan reluctantly held out the pictures.

"What's this?"

"You know the little girl we told you about? Eleven?"

Steve pretended not to see the shadow that crossed Nancy's face when she said the name, instead, he wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her closer to him and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "Yeah... so?"

"This is a picture of how she died."

Ah... Steve's never been good at awkward situations and so when the words slip out of his mouth, he's not surprised he's trying to make light of the situation. "So she blew up?"

"Disintegrated herself while saving Mike, Lucas, and Dustin," Nancy corrects harshly then shakes her head. "I didn't mean to say it like that."

You don't mean to say a lot of things like that, Steve thinks to himself. He loves Nancy, he really does, but he knows she isn't dealing with the death of Barbara as well as her brother's dealing with the death of his little friend. Then again, the kid's insisting the girl's still alive, so maybe Nancy's doing better than him.

Nancy rolled her eyes. "We just... saw something weird."

"What?"

"Try and find it yourself. We want to know if we're just being paranoid or if something's actually there... because if something is, there's a chance..." Fear flits across her face like the shadow of a bird on the ground.

Steve studied the photos, but his eyes kept straying back to the one thing out of place in the picture. Sobbing kids was normally out of place, as is an ash cloud in a school, but the most noticeable thing is not that. "Is that... it looks like..."

"Yes?"

"Like... two balls of... glowing blue light... they're..." Steve twisted the picture, biting his lip in concentration. "It looks like one... is... being forced into the other..."

"And this one?" Nancy passed him another photo.

He squinted at it. "Is that... ball of light... is that slightly larger than the other two had been in this?" He waved the first picture.

Nancy let out a shaking breath. "Yes."

"But there's only one."

"Yes."

Jonathan finally spoke up. "See how that one ball in the second picture is larger than the two separate ones?"

Steve looked up at them. "Shit."

"If those are what I think they are... we're all in danger still," Nancy said grimly. "I don't think we ever stopped."

"Is there a chance... she might still be alive?" Jonathan asked timidly.

Nancy's eyes went to the ground. She hated how some people could do the impossible and come back fine.

She hated those people.

She wanted Barb.

She hated the little girl that had told her Barb was dead.

She hated the girl for acting so... vulnerable yet tough at the same time.

She hated the girl for breaking her brother's heart.

"Yes."

The Demogorgon stood in front of him, but he couldn't move. He was paralyzed with fear.

"Mom!" Will screamed. The Upside Down flashed before his eyes, but it wasn't as empty as before.

"Will, are you all right?" He could hear his mother's voice but he couldn't see her. He could feel her too.

His eyes were glued to the doorway of his room, where a shimmering boy, like a mirage, stood smiling faintly. His face shimmered so that Will couldn't see it clearly. What he could see was marred with blood, dirt, and half-healed cuts. He could see his eyes clearly, but only just. The boy's hair was a light brown and curls softly. It's about the length of Mike's hair, actually, but the curls have more volume. But still, Will almost thought it was like he was from a dream. Was he his guardian angel? The boy smoothed the sweatshirt he was wearing that looked surprisingly like one of Mike's and met his eyes. The boy's were brown and warm and intelligent. Will's were brimming with tears and fear and wonder.

"Help," the boy whispered.

"I'm Will," he whispered; the strange boy seemed lost and he wanted to help him. If he was in the Upside Down, he was in trouble. "I don't know who you are. How did you get here?"

"Monster," the boy whispered. Then suddenly a wind blows in but it's red, not clear.

Will screams when he realizes the reason it's red is because the boy is disintegrating and his blood and guts are flying away. Will spins around and far away in the clouds a monster swings its head around.

He stopped abruptly. Had he had a good look at the boy's left wrist? He didn't think so.

Then the boy's scream ripped apart the Upside Down and Will was in the bathroom, his mother and Jonathan banging on the door. A slug crawled down the kitchen drain.

"Sorry, Mom," he said, opening his door. "I just had a nightmare. I'm fine now."

Joyce eyed her younger son carefully. She knew he was lying but he wasn't going to tell her unless he wanted to.

Inside his room, Will sat on the bed and did the one thing that he had sworn to himself never to do: he thought about the Upside Down.

When he opened his eyes, he was back in the dreaded place, but he explored with a new vigor.

There were no signs that the boy had ever been there, but Will soon felt a tugging in his chest that he followed. When he was in the murky woods, he saw the boy again, standing next to a box.

"Hello," the boy greeted him. "How did you get back here?"

"I... don't know," Will said with a dry throat. "I just thought about this place."

The boy looked at him, squinting a bit. "I wish it was that simple for

me. I want to go home, Will."

"Do you know how you got here?" Will doesn't want to know how the boy knows his name.

His voice took a faintly disturbed tone. "No. That means I don't know how to get out." Then it turned hopeful. "Do you?"

"Can I see something?" Will whispered. He reached out a shaking hand to the boy, and he mirrored his action.

Just as they touched fingers, the boy stiffened. His fingers slid right through Will's.

"No." He backed away.

"What?"

He turned to look at him, and there was a glimmer of intelligence in his eyes. "Go away! Run! Wake up!"

"Why?"

"It's coming!" he shrieked, holding his head like it would burst.

Will stared as the boy started to bleed from numerous scratches on his body, as if the monster he instinctively knew was coming triggered that. Then he realized he was digging his nails into his body to attract the monster, to keep it from him.

"I'm so sorry," Will whispered. He turned around and prepared to run.

But just like before, the boy's shriek of pure agony ripped him out of the Upside Down.

He sat upright in his bed, clutching his heart. Had he really just left an innocent boy his own age to be killed by an Upside Down monster?

Had the boy really sacrificed himself for Will?

Mike blearily opened his eyes. The voice had jerked him awake. *Help me?*

He couldn't understand why El didn't just get herself out of the Upside Down.

"El, just come back to me," Mike begged. He can't take much longer of this torture.

No.

"What?"

No.

"Why not?"

I'm not here.

"What?"

This isn't me. This is just a part of the whole. A divided whole. Two people, one set of pedals.

"How long have you been like that?"

I don't know. I don't think I have a body anymore. The first one does, though. I'm just a visitor. Hopefully.

"The first one?"

MIKE HELP ME! The scream ripped through the air. ***MIKE MIKE MIKE MIKE WHERE ARE YOU MIKE?***

"Eleven?" Mike shouted.

That was his last hope... that the strange voice was Eleven's. But he couldn't fathom a reason as to why she can't get back home or respond.

So she really was dead.

"NO! SHE'S ALIVE! SHE HAS TO BE! I just heard her!"

"Mike," his mom sighs, suddenly at the doorway. "You've got to let her go."

"No! No-"

MIKE IT'S ME! YOU HAVE TO HELP ME! IT'S ME MIKE! The tortured voice rang through the air.

Then the screaming began.

Mike covered his ears with both hands as he listened to the girl he loved scream in wretched pain. Even worse than how she had screamed while defeating the Demogorgon.

Once the screaming stopped he hesitantly uncovered his ears.

This had gone on long enough.

"Lucas!" Mike's voice buzzed in the SuperCom.

"Yes?" Lucas answered, pulling out the antennae.

"Lucas, I need you to cover for me. If I'm not back by the time school ends, you have to tell my mom I'm staying late with Mr. Clarke. Don't worry, I'll be fine."

"Okay, but where are you going?"

Pause.

"I need to do something. Over and out."

"No! No, wait-" Lucas stared at the SuperCom in frustration.

"You idiot, Michael Wheeler. You better not get killed," he grumbled.

Mike pedaled hard and fast down Mirkwood. When he reached Hawkins Lab, he ignored the (locked) gates and climbed over the chain-link fence. He swung a leg over the top and started to climb down, but four feet above the ground his foot slipped and he fell to the ground in an ungainly heap.

He scrambled to his feet and straightened his shirt, instinctively looking around though he knew no one was there.

Mike... The whisper cut through the air like a leaf, soft yet obvious.

"El?" he whispered, turning in a circle, trying to guess where she was in the Upside Down. "El, I'm here for you. Just tell me where you are and I'll come get you." He kept his voice calm and neutral but his face was screwed up with pain. Was he insane or was Eleven really there?

Mike... scared.

"Can you tell me where to go in here? I'm trying to find you but you've got to help me help you." His voice was shaky but he knew not to dwell on her past. If he knew Eleven she didn't want pity, and she shut down when someone asked her about the lab.

The air around him shimmered and a blue ball of light appeared in front of him. It drifted away, closer to the abandoned lab, and Mike followed, feeling more confident now that he had a friend with him. He had underestimated how scared he would be of the lab. He knew it was nothing compared to what she felt, though.

He walked quietly through the halls, not daring to speak even though he knew no one was there. The shadows, rotting smell, and hush made it feel like a haunted house, and maybe it was.

The light stopped outside a room and the door slowly creaked open like someone had pushed it though no one was there. *This was my room.*

What? Mike thought and realized he didn't need to speak to communicate with El when she replied.

I slept here while I wasn't being experimented on.

Mike looked around the deserted room, his eyes roaming over the tiny bed with one mouse-chewed blanket and to the wall. Without thinking, he strode into the room and grabbed the drawing off the wall. It was poorly drawn, stick figures, but the labels were all he needed.

His shaking fist crumpled the paper slightly before it was tugged out of his grip by El.

Let's go.

He followed the light again, past rooms with operating tables and what looked like a blood-drawing machine, past a room with some sort of machine that El called 'the shocking machine' and stepped into the last room with a water tank.

The room. Ash swirled around and he coughed, his lungs already feeling heavy, when the light started forwards into the pulsing hole in the wall that Mike knew was the gate. The ball of light floated through what looked like mucus—living mucus, ew—and a second later it came back out.

Only it didn't.

This time it had a form, a vague, see-through form that barely showed Mike sweatpants and a sweatshirt—the clothes he had first given El.

Overcome by emotion—this is where it ends?—he reached out but the figure raised a hand: *No*.

"I'm so sorry," El said, but her voice was hollow and echoish. "But you need to go. This is the best I can do—"

"I'm not leaving you again!"

"—but it won't hold for long—"

"Well, I don't give a shit about that! How do I get you a body back?"

"—and you need to be out of here by the time it breaks."

"*Why, El?*" Mike asked, and his voice cracked with desperation. "Why can't I save you?"

"Because this isn't me," she said simply. "I will be coming soon and you need to be out of here by then because I won't be able to hold One back—it hates you."

"What's One?" Mike whispered, a cold feeling in his stomach. "Why can't I save you when you come?"

"Because I hurt just by doing this." It was true, her face was chalk-white and blood was flowing freely from her ears and nose. "I won't be able to... you'll need help to do what you want. And I can't do it tonight."

"But—"

El's eyes lit up with fear. "I'm here! I promise, Mike, soon!"

"El—"

"Mike, get the fuck away from me!"

It was her cursing, and only that, that brought him to his senses. He knew what was stepping out of the gate.

El whispered, as her vague form started to dissolve and swirl like a vortex back into the Demogorgon, "monsters never die. This time, I'm the monster."

Mike watched in paralyzed fear as she vanished completely and started to stumble backwards out of the toxic environment, away from his more-or-less dead girlfriend, away from heartache and break and all that other stuff. But he didn't get far.

The Demogorgon was just as rotten as before, with its grey skin and stinking flesh and puckered sort-of face. Its hands were burned and angry and weeping sores were all over its body. But this didn't make it look weak. In fact, it served only to make it look more badass and terrifying.

The Demogorgon roared, its petal lips opening up wide and Mike knew that she had lost control to whoever One was.

His foot caught on something and he fell backwards. He saw the Demogorgon in front of him before his head hit the ground so hard he blacked out.

When he woke up his head hurt tremendously and the world swam in

front of him. He was in the woods next to his bike. A shimmering ghost-like form was next to him, sobbing quietly with her knees to her chest. When El saw he was awake she sobbed even harder.

"Oh, Mike, I'm so, so sorry," she sobbed. "I didn't mean to—I slipped a bit and One shoved me out of the way because it hates you—but I carried you out here and forced myself back to my hell—and this is my fault, all my fault..." She dissolved into tears again.

"Hey," Mike said soothingly, sitting up, the world swimming slightly before going back into focus. "I'm fine, see? I'll find a way to help us both. You said I needed help?" His eyes turned dark for a second. "I'll get some help."

"You don't *understand*," Eleven wailed. "I don't have a body to return to! It's either this or One's body and trust me, the second you saw me in One's body everyone would kill me!"

"Who's One?" Mike asked.

El shook her head. "You don't understand," she whispered, trembling. "I'm supposed to be *dead*, Mike! I don't know why my soul is still here! I should be dead!"

He touched the back of his head where he had hit the ground and felt a cherry-sized lump there, tender to the touch.

A whisper of wind next to his hand told him Eleven had reached out for it too even though she couldn't touch it.

Then she disappeared and Mike's face contorted into a snarl of pain and loneliness and then his face collapsed and he was sobbing into his arms because he had no idea what the fuck to do and everything and everyone depended on him.

And El, but all she can do right now is a shimmering holographic image.

Edited!

4. The Promise

The Promise

"What?" Will was aghast. Or pretending to be. He had seen this coming a mile away, but he had to pretend to be surprised, because if Mike knew that El was visiting him in his dreams he would be banished from the party like *that*. So what if El(?) was a nice girl? So what if she listened to Will? That didn't mean anything. It definitely didn't mean she wouldn't still be his friend when she got back, but Will didn't want to take that chance.

Mike looked at the three boys (plus Max) with a solemn face. "The Upside Down's back," he repeated. "Or maybe it never left. But anyway, I saw something yesterday that concerns everyone. Especially you, Will."

"Why?"

Mike took a deep breath. "El's still alive. And so is the Demogorgon."

Okay, Will had not seen *that* one coming. He had just assumed it was a different monster this time. Well, fuck.

"I think..." Mike let out a breath. "Well, I don't know what I think. El said that she and some other thing called 'One' are continually fighting for control. She said something like 'two people, one set of pedals' or something. But I *think* she might be inside the Demogorgon."

Max held up a hand. "Hold it." She looked around. "Does anyone else hear how jacked up this is? I thought Eleven was dead." But as she met the eyes of her friends, she saw they were convinced.

No, Mike's right.

The blood drained out of Max's face. "Who said that?" she demanded but the others shook their heads, nonplussed, except for Mike, who had his eyes closed. A second later they all heard his voice though he wasn't talking.

Hey, El. Guys, this is El.

"What the hell is going on here?" Lucas breathed.

"That's Eleven?" Dustin asked, excited.

"Yeah," Will said, nodding. Then when Mike opened one eye to look questioningly at him, he said unblushingly, "I remember her voice when she found me in Castle Byers."

Mike quickly thought, *Remember yesterday?*

Yesterday?

Oh dear Lord... Max rolled her eyes.

I do... bad?

Mike whacked Max's leg and frowned at her. *She didn't even know what friends were*, he mouthed because El would hear any thoughts. *She was tortured as a child. Cut her a break.*

Dustin and Lucas were still sitting, dumbstruck and feeling out of their elements as they tried to figure out what to do.

Um... hey, El, Will thought nervously. *How are you?*

I miss you, she replies.

Mike's eyes pop open and he shoots Will the most venomous glare he could have imagined. "How... why in the motherloving—"

Max puts a hand on Mike's arm.

Mike takes a deep breath and continues. "How on earth could she miss you?"

"Um..." He twiddled nervously with his thumbs. "I wasn't sure until now, but I was pretty sure the boy I was seeing in the Upside Down was El, but I didn't want to get your hopes up. Besides, I asked her her name and she never told me, so I just assumed she was El but I wasn't sure."

MIKE! MIKE HELP ME!

The silence rang in their ears as the five looked at each other solemnly.

Mike ran a hand through his hair. "So, yeah. El's alive. She ends all of our meetings like that. I'm not sure exactly what happens."

Dustin snorted. "You act like you're not secretly freaking out in your mind that your girlfriend is alive." Lucas nodded fervently in agreement.

Mike focused a glare on Will. "Don't think you're done yet, though, buddy."

Will swallowed back panic (and a slug) when Mike's glare was focused on him.

Dustin voiced his thoughts for him. "You're in deep shit now, man. Good luck. You'll need it."

The nine year old girl followed her Papa unquestionably through the sterile cold rooms, shivering a bit because every year around this time it would get even colder. One time a worker had come to the lab with a red hat on and a sack. Eleven never got a good luck at it. Needless to say, she didn't know what had been in the sack.

"Eleven," Papa said, kneeling down in front of her in front of another cold white room. "I need you to help me, all right? Help me help you."

Eleven swallowed and after a second nodded slightly—just a twitch of her head, but Papa noticed. "Yes, Papa," she whispered, her throat tightening with fear.

Papa patted her head. "Good girl."

So she sat down stiffly in the white chair, watching her Papa as he walked to the edge of the room and conversed with another man, scowling in anger. Panic gripped Eleven; what if his anger was directed at her? She shuddered, remembering the last test.

She watched her Papa with wariness and also for approval as the other workers strapped her arms and legs to the chair.

"Papa," she tried to whisper but it was so faint even she couldn't hear it.

Eleven turned her head away as her Papa began a speech to another man: "Eleventh test subject child, first child to have powers", the usual.

"And how does it react to using its powers?"

Eleven wanted to tell the man she was not an it but she knew to keep her face impassive and swallow down her protests or later she would get the room.

Her eyes stared blankly ahead until Papa called her name gently. She moved them slowly to his face but didn't move her head one inch. "Show the nice man what you can do," Papa said soothingly.

Eleven knew what she was going to have to do, and that didn't make it any less hard, but maybe this time would be different. Maybe Papa would be happy with her best and wouldn't push her until she passed out. Maybe she would be all right this time.

When she finally came to, Papa and the new man were talking again.

"—electricity?" the man asked.

Papa's eyes narrowed the slightest bit but he nodded. "Maybe that would strengthen her powers," he admitted. "We can try."

And then Eleven was strapped to a new machine, not struggling because she didn't know what electricity meant. Maybe it was something good, like being alone in her room and drawing.

And maybe she would get out of here someday.

And then the cap with wires was placed on her shaven head, but this one felt different.

Eleven looked to Papa for reassurance and he nodded slightly.

Eleven's muscles seized up as pain overtook her whole body, as white-hot fire coursed down her veins, as she wanted to cry or scream but she couldn't control her body. She was shaking in her chair, her fists clenched as her back arced and she still wanted to scream but she heard Papa shouting something and the pain stopped and she went limp, sagging against the restraints.

"Now, that's a problem," she heard before she slipped away into the Nowhere.

Mike looked at Will with narrowed eyes. "You *knew*," he spat. "You *knew*, all along, that she was alive, and you didn't think to tell me? To tell us? She saved your life when you were in the Upside Down by telling us where you were, but you can't return the favor?"

"That's just the thing!" Will defended. "I didn't know until a week ago! I hadn't even seen her in the Upside Down until a week ago, and I thought she was a boy and another experiment because of her hair!"

"Wait..." Dustin said, picking up the pieces. "How were you in the Upside Down?"

Will sighed. "I just sometimes blink, and then I'm in the Upside Down."

The girl watched, her hand pressing against the Upside Down mirror in Mike's basement's bathroom, looking at the four boys and girl in the reflection. She ached to touch them, to communicate with them, but she barely had enough strength to *walk* now, definitely not even enough to levitate something bigger than a cat.

In the mirror, she could see the darkness swirling around Will, thickening but then thinning while he swallowed for a second, but then it would come back, darker than before. In a second, he had to jump up and excuse himself for the bathroom. The girl pulled back too late, wanting to watch but not wanting Will to see.

He looked up and met her eyes. She kept her hand on the glass, knowing that he knew that she knew that he knew she was there.

"Hello," she said softly, trying to smile but her mouth kept wavering, her eyes trying to overflow.

"MIKE!" Will screamed in answer.

The others rushed into the bathroom, only to stare at the mirror in confusion that Will had his hand pressed against.

"What, Will?" Mike asked, running a hand over his tired eyes. "I thought something important had—" He placed a hand on Will's arm, trying to spin him away from the mirror, when something flashed in his vision. He withdrew, gasping, for a second before touching Will's shoulder again and seeing the person in the mirror.

"Is this some kind of fucking joke?" he asked because the person in front of him had a body. El had an actual body! They could still save her!

"I don't know," Will whispered.

"Mike," El whispered, her eyes overflowing and her mouth trembling as she tried to force it into a smile. "I've missed you."

Nancy rode in Jonathan's car in silence, her arms crossed over her chest, biting her bottom lip nervously.

She almost laughed when they started to pick out the same monster-hunting tools and the same worker at the same shop gave them the same look and Jonathan accidentally said the same excuse she had the first time.

As Jonathan slammed the door to his trunk, he looked at Nancy. "Something's going on, though, right?"

Nancy nodded. "Definitely. There was actually a sighting yesterday—a man saw a wounded animal on the road. He pulled out his phone to call for help, but when he looked up the animal was gone. He swears that it wasn't just a trick of his eyes. He even took a photo of the blood on the ground to prove it."

Jonathan let out a long, measured breath. "This is bad. So very fucking bad."

"Steve?" Nancy asked, her hand halfway to her pocket, already flipping her phone open while Jonathan nodded.

"Have you been practicing your softball skills lately?"

Inside the ash cloud, seconds before both bodies disappeared and only one reappeared in the Upside Down, two balls of blue, ethereal light spun with the ash. One looked almost like it was chasing the other, and the other was running away. Then they crashed together, becoming one, larger ball of blue light. But it looked like it was being pushed apart from the inside, as if one part of it was still straining against the confines of the other. Then the blue light(s) were swallowed into a dark mass and they disappeared.

Mike was in another rage. He had forgotten that tonight was the Snow Ball. He crumpled up a flyer on the ground and threw it across the room. The D&D board crashed to the ground as Mike kicked the table.

"You fucking *promised*, El!" he yelled. "And now we have to save you again! I'm in deep shit! You're in deep shit! We're all in deep shit! We're screwed! I give up! I hate everyone!"

He turned and kicked open the door to the bathroom, pressing his hand to the mirror, fruitlessly hoping he would be able to see El like Will had. The two shared a connection that Mike envied and was a little afraid of—he still liked El and to lose her to his best friend would ruin his relationship with Will, his friends would have to take sides, and El would probably be confused and scared the whole time.

Mike started to cry, tears dripping off his nose into the sink and shining in midair like tiny crystals. "I'm sorry, El," he sobbed. "I'm so sorry."

He shook his head to clear it, and one of the tears flung onto the mirror. Instead of rolling down the mirror, it made a slight hissing

noise as that part of the mirror stopped showing his reflection and instead showed just darkness.

Mike stared at it, twisting his head this way and that until the eye he was squinting into the hole with found another eye. He jumped back about a foot before he recognized the eye.

Excitedly, he turned on the sink and splashed water on the mirror. Everywhere it touched it sizzled and turned into a picture.

El gave him a smile that told him *I knew you would figure it out.*

"Figure what out?" Mike asked, now thoroughly pissed because if she had been able all along to create a sort of walkie-talkie for them and hadn't, he... would still be thoroughly pissed.

Now he drank in her appearance, though it wasn't that comforting. She was a deathly pale, her hair matted and blood-stained. Her eyes were sunken and shadows surrounded them. Her sweatpants were torn in multiple places and she was shivering. A scratch along her forehead had just begun to scab over and blood had dried under her nose and her ears.

"Water... pure," El said simply. "I, monster...not."

"Why can't you come back?" Mike was desperate, pleading with her.

She shot him a look that said *Get a hold of yourself* and *I wish I could, asshole* and *If I could would I really be here right now* and *I miss you but also I kill everything I touch, dumbass, so I'm trying to stay away and keep you safe.*

"Bad men still look for me," she said instead after a while. "I kill everything. I can't kill you too. And... tired. Cold." She wrapped her arms around herself for emphasis.

Mike slammed his fist on the sink, startling El and making her jump. "I don't give a fuck about that shit," he growled. "I want you to be here, right now! You're a good person and we both know it!"

El gave him a look. "I could kill you," she said in a whisper.

Mike waited for a good chance to reassure her he wasn't worried about that.

"I could squeeze your brains out of your head. I could snap your neck. I could do so many things. I *have* done so many things. I'm a monster."

That was the most Eleven had ever said to Mike. "You would never do any of that to me," he said softly. "We're friends. You would never hurt me on purpose."

"Lucas," El contradicted quietly, reminding him of when she had lost control and hurt Lucas.

Mike winced, thinking of how he had yelled at her afterwards.

"That was an accident."

"Mike," she whispered and placed her hand on the mirror. Mike moved his to mirror her position so their hands almost touched.

Then Mike was suddenly in a white room. A little girl with soft, wispy hair riding on top of a man's back, giggling uncontrollably, was brought in.

"Papa," El said quietly at Mike's shoulder. Mike didn't respond but to gaze upon the bastard. What was going on? "Memory," El murmured, rubbing her wrist where her tattoo was.

"Eleven," Dr. Brenner said, "you must stay very still for this, okay?"

"What will you do, Papa?" Small El asked, gazing up at him with adoration in her eyes.

"This is just a precaution," Brenner said soothingly, running a hand over Small El's curls. "So if you ever get lost we can find you and take you back home, all right?"

"All right," Small El nodded.

To Mike it looked like she was signing her doom. He wasn't too far off.

The workers strapped El into a chair, taking her wrist and turning it over to reveal unmarked skin. She shifted a bit, uncomfortable, and the Big El next to Mike stuffed her fist in her mouth to keep from sobbing.

So Mike had to watch in absolute horror as the workers held down a screaming, sobbing El as they branded the numbers **011** into her skin. Big El buried her face in Mike's shoulder once it was finished and only Little El's wailing and sobbing could be heard.

"Eleven," Brenner said, kneeling by her once she had calmed herself down enough to glare at him. "Eleven, it's just a precaution."

And then, by some miracle, all the men that had been in the room, apart from Brenner, fell to the ground, gasping for air. El's eyes rolled back in her head and Brenner stared at his former co-workers, dead on the ground, before looking back at Eleven.

"A formidable weapon," he said softly before starting to un-strap her limbs.

Then the scene changed. A slightly larger but still Little El stood in front of them. They were in a dark room, and she was screaming, begging for her Papa to come save her.

"The room," Big El whispered at Mike's side.

They were back in Mike's basement now, the same place but as far away as they could be.

"Solitary confinement," Mike whispered in fear. He looked at the frail girl in the mirror with a mixture of awe and fear. "El, what did they do to you?"

The girl smiled sadly and disappeared.

"Why would you show that to me?"

"Always looking," she says quietly, tapping her wrist. "Always."

Then she's gone.

"No!" he screamed. "No! It wasn't a dream! El, please!"

He ran down to the basement and flung water all over the mirror. When it failed to sizzle, he collapsed to the ground, shaking from sobs.

"Please... El..."

Snow Ball, a voice whispered in his ear.

El? Mike thought hopefully.

Sorry. Broke promise.

"No, you didn't!" Mike practically yells. "El, if you ever come back I'll take you to the Snow Ball, all right? If anything, I broke my promise. Not you."

Mike was assaulted with pictures that he had never seen. His own face swam down at him, and he was saying something about being all right and Eggos, but he wasn't really listening. He was staring at the face, trying to memorize it, because he knew, somehow, that something bad would happen that night.

And if something bad did happen, he would be the one to set it right.

Mike slammed his fist into the wall. "Why didn't you tell me?" he screamed to no one. "Why did you know and not tell me?"

But El had never truly understood that humans needed to communicate. She hadn't understood that when you have a childhood as fucked up as hers, you needed to tell someone. She hadn't understood what friends were. She hadn't understood what promises were. She hadn't known that by communicating she could have stopped it all.

She had been trapped in her own little fucked up world for so long she didn't know how to communicate. And Mike ached all over when he realized he could have helped her, could have helped her *so fucking much more* by asking her to explain things, asking her questions about normal things, not just been so focused on saving one friend that he didn't realize he was about to lose another.

Joyce looked at the watch in her hand. She had pocketed it without either child noticing at the school, and she didn't feel guilty enough to give it back.

She had wanted so badly for her own child to come home that she hadn't realized another was just as lost. In just as much pain. Just as alone. And then... she hadn't even said good-bye to Eleven, to the brave, brave girl that had sacrificed herself for so many, for her son, even though El didn't know Will.

Something terrible must have happened to Barb's body to make the small child lose her mask like that and cry. And Joyce hated herself for sending out a small, terrified girl to find her own son and not asking her if she was all right with it. From what Hop had told her, her childhood had been so fucked up. Tortured, beaten, solitary confinement...

The poor thing hadn't had a moment's peace. Escaped one prison only to be found by three boys who only cared about finding another friend. Hunted down nonstop. Died in pain.

She swallowed, the wind rustling her hair as she stood on the cliff. She extended one hand and, fingers shaking, let the watch fall away from her. Down.

Good-bye, El.

Long after Joyce had left, crying, a small object floated up to land on the cliff.

To anyone watching, it was a feather.

Well, to anyone except Dustin.

He moved closer to the 'feather' before realizing that it was not, in fact, a feather—it was Mike's watch.

The watch had just flown up and landed on the cliff neatly.

He ran a hand through his hair.

This was bad.

5. The Nowhere

The Nowhere

Max sat in brooding silence, arms crossed, glaring at nothing as Blossom flitted around like a butterfly, squealing about the baby.

Screw the baby, Max thought sourly.

"Max?" She looked up into Blossom's face. "Aren't you excited for the baby?"

For a second Max considered pasting a fake smile onto her face and lying, but she was too pissed at the world to care about anyone else's feelings.

"Actually, no, I'm not," she snapped, getting up. She was eye level with Blossom, but her anger made her seem larger, and she was definitely a more imposing figure than the whore. "I would have thought you would have known better, Billy!" she rounded on him, fists clenched. "I would have thought you would be responsible enough to not graft our life onto another kid!" Resentment and anger poured out of her mouth from different places: her heart, her soul, her memory.

"That's different," he growled, standing up.

"Oh, yeah?" Max asked, folding her arms. "Give me one example of how it's different!"

"Blossom and I are getting married, for one," he started but Max snorted.

"Oh, I'm sorry, but did I just hear an obligation wedding? Like Mom and Dad? Notice how they only did it after me? Not you?"

Low blow, right there. But it still didn't warrant an actual blow.

For the first time in her life, Max's used-to-be-sweet-and-loving, two-years-older brother hit her.

Gaspings, she touched her smarting cheek but refused to cry. You can ignore pain.

Of the physical variety.

Not so much the emotional.

"Billy!" Blossom gasped.

Max slowly turned her head to look in her brother's eyes. He looked shocked, as if he couldn't believe he had just done that.

"Fuck you," Max said quietly, dangerously, before whipping her hand back and nailing him right in the nose with her fist.

His nose broke.

He staggered away, clutching his nose.

Max grinned for a second, delighted that it had worked. Then her face fell back into a scowl when she remembered why she had punched him.

"Screw you, William!" Max shouted. "I'm not just some little girl who can be beaten into submission. Maybe if we had stayed with Mom and Dad I would be, but I'm not. You made me into this, and you deal with it."

Quieter now, she spat, "And you're not my brother. My brother would never hit a girl."

Then venomously, her eyes narrowing, she added one last bit. "My brother would love me. My brother would be my friend, and he would know that I'm so much fucking stronger than anyone else I know and that you don't cross me."

She grabbed her skateboard, flung her backpack over her shoulder, and walked out of the house, Blossom's wails ringing in her ears the whole way.

She hopped onto her skateboard and looked at the house one last time before doing the one, unforgivable thing Billy had always

forbidden her from doing.

She touched the car.

She didn't just touch it.

She hopped off the board, raised it over her head, and brought it down with bone-crunching force on the windshield. The muscles in her arms she had used to mutilate her brother's nose protested, but Max didn't pay attention. She was strong.

Glass shattered, raining into the front seats of the car.

Max smiled grimly.

Mike was sitting listlessly in his English class, drawing the numbers '011' on his arm in the exact same place that Eleven had had them, Dustin eying him worriedly, when the principal stuck his head inside the door.

"Could we please borrow Mike for a moment, please?" he asked.

Mike shook his sleeve down and his English teacher said, "Yes, of course."

As Mike leaned down to grab his stuff, one of Troy's friends pushed him over. "Frogface," he whispered.

Then, inexplicably, the water bottle on his desk exploded. Somehow Mike managed to avoid all the water, along with Dustin, though Troy's friend and his school supplies weren't so lucky.

Mike grinned. "Thanks, El," he said under his breath.

As he walked out, the kids in his class all went, "Ooooooh, someone's in trouble," but his face didn't heat up like it normally did whenever he was called out of class (which wasn't often). *El, El, El, El, El, El*, his mind chanted.

In the office, Hopper was waiting.

"Hey, kid," he said, standing up, but his tone was gruff—guilty—and his eye twitched. "You and me have gotta talk, alright?"

"Alright."

It could feel the Thing's agony.

The second mind surged forwards, almost into the nothingness, before being sucked back in.

There were three places: Home, the Things' Home, and the place Inbetween where a Thing was only there if It was looking for it.

In the Inbetween, the female, unfamiliar Thing was sitting in a fort—the first mind remembered dragging a screaming Thing from it, and the second mind could faintly picture seeing a Thing in it—and the Things' strange noises reverberating around it.

In the Inbetween the Thing was cradling its cheek. The water that would weep from their eyes sometimes had not yet fallen but had gathered in the Thing's eyes.

It could tell that the Thing's cheek did not hurt anymore, but the pain in its mind did.

It could relate.

"What the hell!" Mike screamed. "You knew—all along—and you didn't tell me?"

"Kid," Hopper said hastily.

"What?" Mike yelled, waving his arms and everything and nothing. "What, Hopper? What's supposed to make that all better? You *believe* that she's all right even though the Eggos haven't been disappearing for weeks?"

"I didn't want to get your hopes up only to crush them again," Hopper mumbled.

Mike's eyes narrowed. "But not telling me and not doing anything killed her!"

"And why is she in the Upside Down in the first place?" Hopper yelled back.

Mike didn't shrink away. "You!" he screamed, and in his anger he towered over the shocked chief-of-police.

"What?"

Mike laughed humorlessly. "You think I didn't notice how the bad men went straight for the cafeteria? Someone sold us out, and it could only have been you or Joyce. Joyce wouldn't sell out another child, not for anything, her motherly instinct is too strong."

"So that leaves *you*." Mike stepped forwards, poking Hopper's chest with his finger. For a skinny, unathletic boy, he was quite menacing.

"Kid, listen—"

"No!" Mike shrieked. "No! You killed her! You killed her!" Sobbing, tears pouring down his cheeks, he turned and raced into the woods.

"Shit," Hopper mumbled before slamming the door shut on his cruiser and following the surprisingly speedy boy.

"Why again didn't he come?" Jonathan asked, gripping his spiked bat so tightly his knuckles were white.

"Said he had homework," Nancy sighed. "I love him, but he is a coward sometimes." She smiled at Jonathan's sour look. "Hey, I know you aren't too fond of him and all, but could you at least give him a chance? You gave me a chance, and look how great I am!" She raised her arms and spun around.

"That's not why I don't like him," Jonathan muttered.

"Huh?"

"Nothing."

"Huh."

A hush fell over the pair, filled with awkwardness.

Nancy's flashlight flickered.

"Jonathan?"

"Get back here!" Hopper bellowed at the still-retreating boy.

"No!" Mike screamed, still crying as he ran. Tree branches smacked his face, leaving scratches all over his body, but he didn't care.

The hood of his sweatshirt caught on a tree branch and he screamed in anger and strained against it. The hood ripped and he kept running.

"For God's sake, get the hell back here!"

Suddenly the forest was gone and Mike was running on a road.

The road.

The same cliff stood in front of him.

He had too much momentum.

He tried to stop.

His feet skidded on the rocks.

He fell, his body twisting awkwardly in midair.

"*Mike!*" the girl screamed, the name returning to her in a blur of pain and light. "*Mike!*"

Danger.

He was in danger.

What danger?

"Mike!" she screamed again.

Danger.

The word echoed around her brain like a warning bell.

Danger.

Stuck inside a cage.

Danger.

Her mind.

Danger.

Danger.

Friend.

Danger.

"Friend," she choked out.

Danger.

Danger.

"Mike!"

Danger.

"Mike!"

Danger.

"M-Mike," she stammered.

Danger.

"Fine," she murmured, defeated. "Fine."

As Mike hung precariously from the ledge, he wasn't afraid.

Most people would be terrified and screaming for help, but he wasn't. Well, he was angry, sure, but he had just realized something important. Well, two things, actually.

The Demogorgon had been attracted by blood. Whenever El had used her powers she had started to bleed—from her nose, her ears. That *couldn't* be a coincidence. It just *couldn't*.

Second, he wondered, what would have happened if he or Lucas or Dustin had gotten a papercut during that week?

Kind of stupid, but he still wondered how many people had been sucked into the Upside Down 'cause of something stupid like a papercut or their period.

Then he slipped.

She reached out, searching for him.

Danger.

"Shut up!" she screamed, throwing her hands up to her forehead, sinking her nails into the tender skin. "Shut up shut up shut up shut up shut UP!"

DANGER.

Then silence.

"No!" she screamed.

Mike was falling.

But it felt to him like it was in slow motion.

Arms flailing, hair streaming up in his line of vision, he saw Hopper appear on the edge of the cliff. He could see Hopper's lips form the word "No" but he couldn't hear it.

"ELEVEN!" he screamed, the wind ripping the sound of his voice from his ears but maybe she would be able to hear it.

The wind was roaring in his ears, twisting his limbs into unnatural positions as he flailed for a grip he knew was not there.

Surely he should have hit the water by now.

Maybe he was dead, and he had done so many bad things in his life that his eternal punishment was being forced to relive his death over and over.

At least let El survive, he found himself pleading. He had never thought of himself as a particularly religious person, but now he was pleading to God.

She stomped her foot, a seemingly childish gesture, but it was opposite of that. Instead, a wave of pure power permeated outwards in a circle. *Safety*, she pleaded. *Safe*.

Then the power hit the person she was looking for.

A brief glimpse—a boy with dark hair flying all around his head, flailing his arms as he fell through the air. Off a cliff, she realized.

"ELEVEN!" the boy screamed, the sound faint and helpless.

The girl's stomach clenched when she heard the sound of his voice.

She willed the air to grab the boy—any part of him it could reach. The wind solidified into a giant invisible hand which grabbed the boy's sneaker just before he hit the water.

The girl smiled for a second before her eyes rolled back up in her head and she collapsed to the ground.

Just milliseconds before he hit the water, milliseconds before his life ended, his momentum was stopped with a jerk.

He was being suspended in midair by one of his sneakers, his arms dangling below him. His fingertips were touching the water. *That was*

how close Mike had come to dying.

"Thank you, El," he whispered, almost crying. "God, El, you're the best person in the world." *And not just because you saved my life—twice*, he added inside his brain.

As if to psych him out, she decided to drop him right then—or she probably just ran out of energy. *I mean, how much food can she get in the Upside Down, really?* Mike thought. *She's fine. She just proved that.* Though the water was pretty fucking cold.

Although not the most athletic person in the world, he was the most athletic of his group of friends, so he had no trouble breaststroking to the edge of the river, keeping his head steadily above the water.

Hopper was stumbling down the side of the cliff, the urgency making him stumble a bit.

Mike sat down on the ground to wait for the cop and to catch his breath. He pushed back the soggy hair on his face. *Wonder if El would like to swim...* he mused. *Probably not, 'cause of the bathtub shit.*

It didn't take long for Hopper to reach him. "What—" he panted, "the fuck was that?"

Mike smiled softly. "You know what that was."

"That was El."

"I went shopping earlier," Nancy said. "I've got enough rounds, we're close enough to the car..."

"How would we attract it?"

"I also bought some raw meat and conveniently forgot to give it to my mom for dinner."

"Will that work?"

"It's eaten dying deer before, so I don't think that it'll discriminate now."

Jonathan smiled weakly, glancing over at her. Their argument dissolved. "Just to see if it's still out there, right?" he asked.

"No big confrontation. The second we see it, get in the car and peel out as fast as we can," Nancy agreed, nodding her head.

Jonathan glanced over to her, at her white knuckles on her flashlight and the nervous way she bit her lip. Suddenly he remembered that she had been in the Upside Down too, if only for a little while.

He considered saying, "You don't have to do this," but he remembered what she had said to that the last time.

Fiercely prideful, Nancy Wheeler. Fiercely independent.

He gripped his gun tighter.

Edited!

6. The Lost Knight

The Lost Knight

"I'm here for the tour."

Overnight the bad men had come back, which made Mike certain they were definitely up to something. He was going to find out, and, if he could, sabotage it.

"I don't think we do any tours," the man at the security station replied doubtfully. "I mean, it's my first day on the job, but I didn't hear anything about a tour."

"Can you please check?" Mike asked, shifting his feet and trying to look innocent. He even tried to think innocent thoughts.

"Give me a second," the man sighed. He turned around to page one of his superiors. When they gave him a definite 'no', he turned back around, only to see... nothing.

"Hey—kid!" he yelled. "Hey!"

He couldn't see any trace of the kid, but there were footsteps on the exit path. None on the entrance. Plus, the path was straight, so he would have seen a little boy running down it.

"It's probably fine," he said aloud.

He stepped back inside his booth to await a nonexistent visitor, facing the entrance path.

Far away, behind him, a dark head poked out of the bushes.

Joyce was in the middle of packing up her Christmas decorations when a light flickered.

She saw it out of the corner of her eye.

"Wh—"

It flickered again.

"Oh, no," she whispered. "Not again."

Nancy took a deep breath before she opened the packaging of raw chicken. She dropped it on the ground, letting the juices spray out of the bag.

"Hopefully that will be okay," Jonathan said at her shoulder.

"Will?" she asked cautiously. "Blink once for yes, twice for no."

Blink, blink

Joyce almost fainted with relief—she didn't know what she would do if she had to relive that horrible week. Then she was hit with an even more awful idea: what if the person was Eleven?

"Eleven?" she asked cautiously.

Blink

"Oh my God," Joyce cried. "Oh my God, baby, I'm so sorry that Hopper sold you out," she said quickly, falling to her knees. "I didn't know until he told me, and they had already left, I'm so sorry, Eleven!"

Then suddenly the radio that was playing soft Christmas music stopped playing.

Joyce turned towards it, heart racing.

Static.

Then a soft voice ran out. "M-Mike?"

Nancy's flashlight blinked out.

"Jonathan —"

"Behind me," he said tersely, gripping his bat.

"No, you sexist pig!" Nancy exclaimed. "I was just trying to say it was coming!"

"Get *behind* me, Wheeler," he repeated impatiently.

"I'm not just some innocent 'suburban girl' anymore!" Nancy whisper-yelled, her gun hanging loosely at her side.

"Is this really the time to—"

"Yes!" Nancy snapped, folding her arms. "Now is the perfect time because I just remembered—"

She ducked as Jonathan swung, hitting the monster that had been creeping oh-so-steadily up on them.

"—that I need to beat the shit out of this motherfucker," Nancy finished.

"Nice job," Jonathan yelled as he swung the bat again.

"Out of the way!" Nancy yelled in response, but as he stepped aside she muttered, "Thank you," under her breath.

"Go to hell, you son of a bitch!" she screamed, peppering its skin with bullet holes.

It screeched and swiped the gun right out of her hands. She stared at them as if they had failed her.

"Well, go get it!" Jonathan yelled at her, trying to dodge the monster's blows.

"Right," she panted, scrambling after the dangerous weapon.

Before she could, though, the Demogorgon disappeared.

They both looked at each other, dumbfounded, when it appeared again—next to the gun.

"Oh shit," Jonathan panted as it slowly bent down and picked up the

strange weapon. Its too-long fingers fumbled with the trigger, but when it shot it let out a sound that was unmistakably gleeful.

"Oh shit' is right," Nancy agreed, shaking her head as she backed away.

The Demogorgon was too busy playing with the gun to notice the pair slowly backing away.

Snap.

Jonathan had stepped on a twig. The Demogorgon's head snapped up and it growled again. It held up the gun. Nancy whimpered.

"It'll be okay," Jonathan whispered.

"It's gonna shoot us!" Nancy whisper-screamed back.

"No it's not," Jonathan said calmly.

"Yes it will!" Nancy whispered hysterically.

There was a bang and a screech of horrible pain.

Nancy screamed too, shielding her face with her arm.

"Hey," Jonathan's voice sounded before he peeled her arm away from her face. "It's all right."

"W-what h-happened?" Nancy whispered, shaking.

"It shot itself," Jonathan said softly before gathering the shaking girl into his arms. "You're all right."

They sat on the ground like that for a while, Nancy curled into his chest with his arms wrapped around her. And for a while they forgot about the monster, and the Upside Down, and Eleven.

Joyce fell to her knees. "No, sweetie, it's Joyce, remember?" she cried. "Sweetie, where are you?"

"M-Mike?"

"Where are you?" she repeated. "Are you in the Upside Down?"

"C-cold a-and d-ark," the girl replied. "M-Mike?"

"I can get him," Joyce promised rashly. "Let me get him!"

She fell over herself as she raced to Will's room.

"How do you work this, how to work this," she muttered to herself as she twisted the knobs on his SuperComm. "Mike?" she asked, holding the receiver up to her mouth. "Mike?"

Static.

She fiddled with the knobs a bit more before the static subsided. "Mike?" she tried again. "It's Joyce. Do you copy? Over."

No reply.

"Mike, I need you to answer," she pleaded. "This is an emergency, Mike."

"Uhhmmuuuhhh," he groaned. "Stop it Will, this is serious!" He turned off his radio.

Joyce stared at it for a while.

"Well, shit."

What the hell are you doing?

The angry voice was so loud and clear Mike stiffened, glancing around him in instinct.

Get the hell away from here right now, El commanded.

"Why?" he argued heatedly under his breath with her.

Do I really need to explain myself? El snapped. *Just get out.*

"Yeah, actually, you *do* need to explain yourself," Mike snapped, done with the secrecy. "You know what? I'm done. I'm staying here until

you explain yourself. Where the hell are you, what the hell are you doing there, and why haven't you come home yet?" He sat down with his legs folded. "Friends don't lie, El," he reminded her.

I don't know where I am, El snapped back, but her voice held twice as much anger and ten times more venom. *I don't know how the hell to get back!*

"What does it look like?" Mike asked.

Nothing, I am nothing.

Mike threw his hands up in the air. "I don't know what the hell that means!" he replied heatedly. "Can you not speak in riddles for once?"

What are—you know what, never mind.

I meant exactly what I said. I don't fucking exist, Mike. And you can't help me unless you know the truth.

Her cursing shocked Mike back to his senses. He wasn't helping her by being passive-aggressive. The poor girl who hadn't known what friends were was driven to cursing because he couldn't save her.

"I'm sorry," he said, sinking his head into his hands.

So am I, she murmured.

For a second, Mike could almost imagine her in the Upside Down in the same spot as him and in the same position. Worlds apart but closer than anyone could have imagined.

"For what?" Mike began, but then he knew exactly what.

His limbs seized up against his will, which was painful for a second before the feeling melted away. He felt himself keel over onto the ground, a rock digging into his forehead, but he almost didn't feel it as well. Everything blurred a bit, like a mirage, before his vision lifted into the air.

For the first time in his life, he felt like he was flying.

He tried to summon nerves from the fact that it felt like he was flying away from his *body*, but he didn't have the strength. It was blissful and excruciating at the same time.

For the first time in his life, he knew what it was like to have a precarious grip on life—and almost be tempted to give it up. Now he knew what Eleven battled every day, and the strength it required drained him immensely. As if holding onto a kite in ferocious winds, he grappled with the string that tied him to his body but it was eventually torn from his grasp.

He watched it go, torn into two parts—terror of what that meant, and the same bliss that seemed to drown out all other thoughts. Looking down at his own body in a comatose state was terrifying and disturbing.

"Eleven?" he tried to ask, and the landscape around him seemed to ripple with that word, as if the trees were made of water.

"Eleven?" he tried again. Another ripple.

"Eleven!" he yelled. For a moment, the landscape *exploded* into thousands of droplets of smoke. For a few minutes Mike was left alone in swirling nothingness. The smoke didn't move like regular smoke—it moved like water, sort of. Then it reformed, leaving him just as alone as before.

Concentrating, he dropped down onto the ground. Floating above it was disconcerting. He felt like a ghost as he stepped over his body, and if he concentrated he could *just* make out a shimmer, sort of, that was him.

There are different paths, Eleven's voice sounded out, dissolving his surroundings before they rebuilt again. *Choose wisely.*

Then her presence was gone, leaving the Eleven-sized hole in his heart empty again.

In front of Mike, a fork in the woods appeared. On one side, it was bright and looked peaceful. Mike thought he saw a deer or two. The other side was dark and foreboding. Animals rustled in the bushes.

Glowing red eyes peered out between the trees.

The confusing part was when Mike tried to analyze it. If this was a test on character, he should go down the bright path. If it was a test on bravery, the dark path would be right.

You are only you right now, Eleven dissolved the scenery again. You have been stripped of all things that make you human and mortal. This is your very essence, the foundation of which Mike was built. Humans lie, but your essence cannot.

A scream sounded from the dark path—now Mike was sure that he was supposed to go that way, and he even wanted to, because the scream sounded like Eleven's.

But still, another part of him wanted to run down the light path for safety.

If Mike had been with his friends, he wouldn't have hesitated at all before plunging into the dark path. Saving face and saving his friends were more important than his own safety.

But now, as only himself with the only witness himself (and Eleven, but he couldn't focus on that—literally couldn't, physically unable to) he felt himself wavering towards the light path.

As he took a step towards it, something triggered inside him. The swirling, slightly nauseous feeling he hadn't even noticed before then disappeared, leaving him feeling more grounded.

He could focus now, and was immediately disgusted with himself. Even though the logical part of him rebelled every step of the way, he turned towards the dark path. Before taking the step over the line of shadows, he took a deep breath.

And then he stepped over.

The world around him exploded again, swirling around him in darkly colored pieces of smoke. It pulled at him, tugged at his hair, trying to consume him. Mike staggered as the smoke pressed closer to him. He swatted at the smoke like it was an annoying fly he couldn't seem to catch. It threw him to one side.

The smoke brought him to one knee, coughing.

"No!" he shouted, rebelling. The smoke seemed to grow darker somehow as it made a sphere around him, swirling and still reaching for him, hungry.

Fight it. All around him, the darkness.

"How?" Trying to consume him.

He was violently jerked to the side and brought to both knees

It is your darkness, your worries, your fears. Overcome them.

He coughed again, covering his mouth with his sleeve. *You'll never find her*, his deepest, darkest fear whispered in his ear.

"No!" Mike screamed, covering his ears with both his hands. But that didn't stop the whispers.

Never

Alone

Dying

You left her

She's already dead

What's the point?

The darkness turned into one thin rope of fears and insecurities. It flew into Mike's open, screaming mouth with a sound like fingernails on a chalkboard. For a second he couldn't breathe and it felt like his heart had been doused in ice. But the ice didn't stop at his heart. Slowly every limb in his body felt cold, but his heart was coldest.

Then his eyes opened.

They were pure black.

Max was sitting down at Castle Byers when she heard it: the crunching of feet. People. She was *not* in the mood to talk to someone right now.

"Go away!" she yelled at whoever was coming before looking down at the sketch she had been drawing.

The footsteps stopped, but Max couldn't hear the person walking away.

"Oh, very clever, Eleven," she grumbled. "What do you want?"

With a sound of roaring wind, a ball of blue light sped towards her. But as the blue light flew through the air, it shifted into the rough shape of a human. In the sunlight she shifted and shimmered, nearly impossible to see.

"I tried to do something today," El said.

"What?"

"Show Mike the truth."

"Oh, so you'll show Mike but not me?"

"That's not fair, Max."

"Fine, whatever."

"I don't trust anyone—not even you, sorry—except for Mike to accept me after everyone learns the truth. Maybe not even Mike."

"Why?"

El shrugged. "Gut instinct. Trust me, you'll hate me."

"So what's going on with Mike?"

El looked doubtful for a few seconds.

"I tried to put it in perspective, you know? Right now he's feeling what it feels like to be trapped inside his own head. For his entire life."

"Which is you, right?" Max shook her head in disbelief. "You're one fucked-up little child, you know that?"

"Oh, just because I say I'm stuck inside my own head? I shudder to think what you would say if you knew what happened at the lab."

Max clapped her hands together. "Anyway."

"Yeah." Eleven shook her head as if to clear it. "After that I'll show him what it looks like to be stuck inside *my* little fucked-up mind—" bitterness soaked through her tone, making it seem more like venom — "and then I'll show him the truth."

Max shook her head and whistled slowly. "Pity first, huh?" she asked. "Smart one, there."

Then she shook her head. "And no, I don't think I would hate you."

"I know you will," Eleven said tiredly—this argument was getting old fast.

"How do you know that?" Max countered. "Can you suddenly see the future now?"

"I can predict the most possible outcome!" Eleven snapped back, defensive. "I'm not *dumb*. I *had* to trust my gut instincts or I would be killed, Max. I know what I'm doing. Unfortunately, you don't. And you don't know what's driving me to do it." She dissolved again and Max stared at the pieces of smoke for a while before starting to sketch again.

Her drawing was only half-finished, but the outline of the swirling sphere of smoke Eleven erupted in whenever she left was clear. Max frowned before adding another stroke to one side of the sphere, making it darker.

And at the top she had written 'To Be Dealt With'.

Eleven smirked to herself as she walked through the woods. But as she walked, her features seemed to melt somehow, blurring as if being burned in a fire.

For a second she was hidden behind a tree.

And then she stepped out from behind it.

But it wasn't Eleven this time.

A girl with fluffy golden curls, blue eyes, and a sneer twisting her lips stood in her place.

And on that girl's wrist were the numbers '013'.

Brenner stood up as the girl walked into the building.

"How did it go?" he asked.

The girl smirked. "Perfectly."

"The boy?"

"He won't escape unscathed."

"And the girl?"

"Completely convinced."

Dr. Brenner allowed himself a small smile.

"Well done, Thirteen."

Edited!

7. The Inbetween

"Eleven?" Mike called, taking a step in the darkness. "Eleven, where are you?"

Then he was in the woods. And in front of him was a mangled body.

"No," he whimpered, stepping closer to it. It couldn't be- should so recently spoken to him!

Then he turned and vomited in the grass.

It was unmistakably Eleven's body.

Her skin was torn and pale, grossly ripped flesh hanging off and blood leaking out. He could see *inside* her body, which would scar him for life. Even when he closed his eyes, the picture of her body would flash in his eyelids.

"No!" he screamed, down on all fours. "No! No! No!" he clutched his head as if to forcefully remove the image from his brain.

"NO!"

The last bellowed protest shattered the scene.

Then Mike was back in the school, and Eleven was killing the demogorgon. Instead of her being sucked away, she collapsed to the ground.

"Eleven!" Mike screamed. He half-crawled, half-ran to her crumpled form. She was breathing shallowly but she was still alive.

She smiled up at him.

Then he was at school, and he's turned a corner into a deserted hallway. Well, deserted except for a couple making out. He was about to ignore them when he realized it was 11 and some other dude.

His heart was in his chest but he turned away anyway, avoiding a his heart was in his chest but he turned away anyway, avoiding a

confrontation.

The next day he walked into the same hallway and the boy and El were always there. it wasn't until the 5th day did he summon the courage to approach them.

"El, what are you doing?" he asked, trying to mask the hurt in his voice but failing miserably.

Eleven jerked her head around to look at him, a smirk on her lips that was identical to the ones on the popular bitches' face when caught doing something 'naughty'.

"Sorry Mike," she said with a flirty laugh. "But you're just kinda too nerdy, you know?"

Then he was sucked back into a different scene. This time it was what would have happened if Elle had never escaped and this one scared him most of all.

He saw Will running blindly in the Upside Down before being caught by the demogorgon. He saw Joyce going out of her mind with worry before eventually committing suicide after a month of his absence. Hopper was found dead in his home, apparently having overdosed on pills.

He saw Will dying in the Upside Down and Jonathan moving as far away across the country as he could. He saw Steve dumping dumping Nancy after a year or two and her being unable to find anyone that would date her because of the whole 'slut' thing. She moved away, never speak to her family again.

He, Lucas, and Dustin started fighting more and more until one day they agreed that they were better off not friends. They never spoke more than a few words to each other after that.

Lucas eventually started dating different girls, never spending more than a week with them and never going to more than second base with them.

Dustin went on to be a science teacher in New York but wasn't that interested in dating at all. At 35 years old he was mugged and shot in

an Alleyway.

Mike went on to marry a peppy Suburban girl with fluffy blonde hair and blue eyes and she wouldn't stop talking. She couldn't be less like Eleven and neither of them loved each other but he had a comfy job at a computer store and she liked that.

Many more people were taken, and by the time Mike was 23 the town of Hawkins was deserted, believed to be haunted.

But worst of all, he saw the rest of Eleven's miserably short life. She was eventually shocked to death two months after Will died as a punishment because she refused to save the life of one of the workers after the demogorgon mauled him.

By now Mike was begging for the agony to be over, to just be done with the test. He wanted to go back and go on the light trail so he wouldn't have to go through this torture.

Then he saw the last, most terrifying scene.

The day after Eleven died, *he woke up*.

And then suddenly he was in his own body again.

"So that was the truth?" Mike screamed, disregarding his surroundings. "I *made it up*?"

There was no reply.

"I'm insane," Mike muttered, rubbing his forehead. "I'm in love with a figment of my imagination!"

The girl watched with teary eyes as the boy fell for the trick.

He was in the darkness with her, the Inbetween, but he couldn't see her. She tried to lay a hand on his arm, but her hand passed right through him. As she began to dissolve again, she didn't bother to call out for him.

Because she could feel the other one. She had curled tightly inside his

mind, gripping it with an iron fist. She wouldn't let go easily, and in the girl's half-dead, half-alive state, she was no match for the other girl. Manipulating your appearance and others' emotions could definitely come in handy sometimes.

But that didn't stop the hurt that blasted through her when the boy convinced himself she wasn't real.

She disappeared again with a whoosh of air that sounded almost like a sigh of relief.

"Lilith," Thirteen said, pronouncing the name carefully.

The teacher smiled at her. "Okay, Lilith. Nice to meet you."

She smiled back like an angel, tilting her head a bit. Underneath her desk, her hands twisted.

Twisting the teacher's emotions, of course.

Mike wasn't really paying attention when he walked into class the next day. "Dude," Lucas said at his shoulder but he waved him away.

"I'm fine," he mumbled.

"Oof!" a girl with blond curls and wide blue eyes tripped and fell straight into him. "Sorry!" she exclaimed immediately when his books fell to the ground.

"It's okay," Mike said automatically, picking up her books. As he handed them back to her, their eyes met. She made a weird motion with her hand.

He felt a swooping sensation in his stomach.

"What's your name?" he asked, stuttering a bit.

The girl smiled. "Lilith."

"Oh—well, I'm sorry, Lilith," Mike said, stumbling over his words.

Lucas watched him in amazement.

"What's your name?" Lilith asked, tilting her head a bit but maintaining perfect eye contact. Lucas found it unsettling that she didn't even blink, but Mike didn't even notice.

"Mike," he said, stuttering again.

Then the bell rang and Lucas jerked Mike into his seat.

"What the fuck was that, man?" he hissed into Mike's ear.

Mike looked dazed and confused. "What?"

"I thought you were going to keep looking for Eleven, not throw yourself at any girl that looked at you!" Lucas whispered heatedly.

Mike gave him a funny look. "Look, it was fun at first, but not anymore, okay?"

"What?" Lucas was stunned.

Mike leaned towards him a bit as Mr. Clarke started talking.

"Stop playing that game," Mike sighed, rolling his eyes. "It was a fun make-believe game, but it's over now."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Lucas whisper-shouted. The people next to them gave them disgruntled looks but they both disregarded them.

Mike kept his eyes glued to Mr. Clarke as he replied.

"Come on, we both know that Eleven doesn't exist. I can't believe you think that a figment of our imagination is real, but that's just you, I guess."

Lucas stared at him in horror. "What the fuck happened to you, man?"

Mike stared at him for a second. "What do you mean?" he looked back at Mr. Clarke. "I haven't changed at all."

"So the Demogorgon was just make-believe too, huh?" Lucas was furious.

Mike looked at him strangely. "Uh, duh."

Lucas looked at Dustin, who was next to him and had been listening in on the conversation the entire time. Dustin passed him a note that read, The fuck?!

This cannot be right, Lucas wrote. Just yesterday he was going on and on about how we couldn't leave El in the Upside Down.

Holy shit, Dustin responded. Look at the girl's wrist right now.

Lucas snuck a glance at Lilith, who was grabbing a book out of her desk. A black mark on the inside of her wrist glinted darkly in the fluorescent lights.

A tattoo.

'013'

"She's definitely from the lab," Lucas said, pacing.

"But then why is she trying to make Mike forget about the Upside Down? El was good," Dustin pointed out.

Lucas shook his head. "I have no idea."

"Maybe she's supposed to be the one who comes and 'cleans up,'" Dustin suggested.

"What do you mean?" Lucas asked.

"Like, there's still a lot of evidence that points straight to Hawkins lab," Dustin said thoughtfully. "Maybe they're still trying to skirt around prison."

Lucas nodded slowly, thoughtfully. "You know, I wouldn't be surprised if that is true."

"See, this is why you all should listen to me more," Dustin muttered, trying (and failing) to look angry.

Lucas punched him softly. "We listen to you plenty."

"Not enough," Dustin grumbled, but he was smiling.

Mike looked at two of his three best friends with barely concealed disgust.

"Didn't you see the tattoo on her wrist?" Dustin pressed.

"There was no tattoo on her wrist!" Mike argued.

"Yes, there was!" Lucas shot back. "We both saw it!"

"You're crazy," Mike said with disgust, sitting back in his couch.

"And what about her not blinking at all?" Dustin intervened. "That's pretty creepy, you gotta admit."

"I have no idea what the fuck you're talking about," Mike folded his arms with defiance.

"Just because she's a girl doesn't mean she's innocent!" Lucas leaned closer, and the two boys could tell it was not a good idea to mess with him. "El was a girl and she opened the gate! She could have told us what was going on the second she found out Will was missing!"

Joyce was sitting at her table, anxious, with her phone pressed to her ear. "I don't get what's so confusing about that, Hop," she snapped.

He said something and she growled. "I know what I heard!"

She waited a beat, her lips pressed together, before sighing. "Um, hello, remember when my son went missing and everyone called me crazy when I said he was still alive? And then he turned out to be alive? I know I'm right again, Hop."

When he said something else to her, she slammed her fist down onto

the table. "Fine! When it's a good time for you, call me back!"

Hopper pulled the phone away from his ear with a sigh. "Good job," Brenner said approvingly.

Hopper bit back his reply—that he didn't care about his opinion on how well he deceived his allies—and nodded, sitting back in the chair.

"I think that's it for today, though," Brenner said, standing up.

Hopper nodded and lit a cigarette. As he stepped out of the building, a car pulled up. A girl—Mike's age—stepped out with a dainty gait that reminded Hopper of one of the sluts he had—let's just say met—shortly after his divorce.

"Good afternoon, Thirteen," one of the guards said to her with a nod of respect.

Hopper bit back a gasp of surprise.

The girl tucked a strand of fluffy blond hair behind her ear and looked up at the guard with a flirtatious smile. Hopper didn't miss the conveniently low-cut top she was wearing or how she led with her chest as she walked into the building.

With a shudder, he ducked into the car.

An evil Eleven. Just what they needed.

Nancy was climbing into her bedroom when her shirt caught on something. It ripped surprisingly loudly and she glanced down at it in exasperation. Great. A jagged hole marred her only black shirt. She would have to buy a new one. She tumbled into her room and stood up just in time to see Jonathan peel away in his car.

She frowned, her hand half-raised in farewell. It was unusual for him to just leave like that.

Huh.

Mike stood up, and even though he was scrawny and not that athletic, the anger radiating from his body was enough to make the two boys cringe.

"I don't want to hear any more of that shit!" he growled. "She's—not real!" With every word, he jabbed his finger to the ground as if an important piece of evidence was lying there.

"I don't know what the fuck happened to you, man," Lucas said, shaking his head, "and you can chase that Lilith girl all you want, but we're gonna get to the bottom of this."

"You have fun chasing imaginary girls and monsters, then," Mike snorted, crossing his arms. "I won't be joining you."

Lucas leaned closer, jabbing his finger into Mike's chest. He slapped it away. "She's probably listening right now, you asshole! And when we get her out of the Upside Down, who knows? Maybe she won't like you anymore."

"Screw you!" Mike shouted.

"No, screw you!" Lucas shouted. "I don't know what the fuck's wrong with you, man. I don't know who you are." He gave his former friend a disgusted look. "This isn't you, Mike."

"I don't—"

Lucas threw the first punch this time.

Mike staggered a bit but regained his footing just in time for Lucas to throw him to the ground.

"Open your eyes, man," Lucas growled, leaning over the boy. "Open your eyes the hell up!"

"Get out," Mike snarled. "Get the hell out of my house!"

Later, Lucas and Dustin were in front of Will's house when Dustin brought up the million-dollar subject. "You—"

"I don't give a shit if I get banned from the party," Lucas interrupted.
"What matters is that we get El back."

Dustin gave Lucas a peculiar look. "You sure you aren't trying to get her back for any other reason? You—"

Lucas sighed. "Mike's being an asshole right now, but I wouldn't do that to him. Frankly, 'bald' isn't really my type of girl anyway."

Dustin grinned. "Plus, we need her to get rid of Thirteen and the Demogorgon."

"That too."

"Trust me."

"Seriously, how would you—"

"I don't know!" Will said impatiently, leaning back in his chair. Lucas lounged on his bed and Dustin hung halfway off it, staring upside-down at the boy.

"Have you even met her?"

"Well, yeah. She tried to use her powers on me, but eye contact is crucial for her."

"That would explain the—" Dustin sat up and pointed to Lucas. "The eye thing!"

"Yeah," Lucas nodded. "But what are her powers?"

"She can alter how she looks," Will said. "And control the emotions of others."

"How do you know all that?" Dustin asked, his lisp even more prominent whenever he was anxious.

"Trust me, when someone's hair turns black, then pink, then back to blonde, you know something's up," Will said with a shrug.

"And the emotions thing?" Lucas prompted.

"Well, it's highly unusual for every boy in the entire school to suddenly like a creepy, not-that-pretty new girl the second she walks by and then suddenly lose interest when she's gone but when she comes back again they're all over her. Trust me. Plus I was eating my lunch, I looked up, and..."

Will had just taken a bite of his sandwich when the wriggling feeling at the back of his throat appeared. In that split second of being in the Upside Down, everyone disappeared.

Except Lilith.

"And what?"

"Nothing."

"Will—"

"And—" Will spoke loudly, drowning out Dustin's voice. "Have either of you looked up what her name means?"

Blank stares.

"In Hebrew, Lilith was the first female demon or something like that. The name 'Lilith' is also associated with water monsters and other monsters like that."

"So?"

"So I'm just saying, maybe it's a clue."

"Come on!" Lucas shot down the suggestion. "You think someone's name defines who they are?"

Will swiped his hand across the air like dealing a winning deck of cards in poker. "Her real name is Thirteen. She's a bitch. She probably picked out her fake name."

Dustin's face dawned with comprehension. "Maybe she picked out the name of a demon—"

"—On purpose," Lucas interrupted, finally catching on. "Or maybe she wants us to figure out. Maybe she's just playing with us."

Max casually walked back inside her house as if it was no big deal, like she wasn't actually secretly scared to see her brother and his unpredictable anger.

"Where were you?" Billy growled the moment she walked through. It was obvious he hadn't slept—he had bags under his eyes and his hair was all over the place.

"Why do you care?" Max coolly brushed him away.

"You're my sister!" he exclaimed impatiently.

Max whirled around to meet his eyes squarely. "No I'm not," she said quietly. Dangerously. "You're not my brother until you prove it."

8. The Four

The Four

Eleven, now with curly brown hair that reaches the nape of her neck, screams, hands covering her ears. Her ears are bleeding but that's not her doing. She's not even using her powers.

Slowly, without her consent, one knee touches the ground, sending ripples of shock up and down her legs. The thin layer of water on the floor of the Inbetween soaks the ripped fabric of her dress instantly, spreading upwards like the shock.

"Jane," the half-shrouded figure croons. It's as if she's not even struggling to keep the other girl down.

"Eleven," El corrects through gritted teeth, hunching her head inbetween her thighs, one kneeling and the other struggling to stay lunged. She groans as she hears a pop and the blood starts to trickle out of her eyes.

(Jane is the name of Terry Ives' daughter. Jane is the name of the life she should she have had before her Papa stole her away from her Mama. Jane is not the name of the experiment.

Eleven is the could-have-been Jane, the broken glass in the shape of a girl-but-not-girl, the twisted metal that once was a weapon, the stick splintering in the middle. Eleven is the frantic animal backed into a corner, lashing out and selfish enough to want freedom. Eleven is the one cursed with a 'gift' and the one selfish enough to not share it with others.

El is the Eleven that Mike sees, the superhero that saved all their lives. El is the friend that is backed into a corner and *forced* to do all the bad things she's done. El is the girl who was tortured and never had a childhood, the girl normal enough to crave freedom. El is the girl who doesn't know things like friends and love and normal and Mike's determined to teach her all about that.)

"Poor, poor Jane," Thirteen coos, crouching in front of El, who lifts

her head to glare at the younger girl. Blood stains her teeth but at least that was caused by her—El bit her tongue. "You're stuck in the Upside Down, running from your family *and* your friends, and the only thing you can focus on is what you're called? You must really feel out of control if that's what you're correcting me about." The younger girl lifts Eleven's chin, brow crinkling at the blood leaking out of wherever it can be—nostrils, eyes, mouth, ears.

The sound of palm hitting cheek rings out throughout the emptiness unfolding forever and ever into nothing and so does the sound of Eleven's other knee hitting the ground. El feels as if the entire world's trying to push her down onto the ground, sucking the air out of her lungs.

"You do know your precious Mike doesn't believe in you anymore, right? He thinks he's got a crush on me," Thirteen snorts. "I don't think I'll ever be able to get used to being called 'Lilith', you know. You're lucky *you* were Eleven. El was obvious. What nicknames can you even get out of Thirteen, anyway?" She shakes her head and pokes El's shaking forearm with one painted claw.

It hits the water, spraying El in the face. The small crimson drops mixing into the water give her the cloudiest reflection of what she looks like.

Her hair's darker than the last time she looked into a body of water to see her appearance. It's shorter than the wig and curlier. She hardly looks the same, blood running in rivulets down her face, eyes red (that'd happened a few times in the lab, she'd popped a blood vessel), teeth stained.

She's not Mike's El anymore.

El's forehead hits the water with a resounding crack and she lets out the smallest sob, thinking of the boy with curly black hair. They nearly match now but would he even recognize her?

The air wavers around the younger experiment and then Mike's standing in front of her but speaking in Thirteen's voice. "You could come back, you know," Thirteen-Mike says above her. Her voice isn't welcoming or cold, she's just the robot the bad men tried to make

Eleven. "That's why I'm here. You wouldn't believe they're *still* all over you." Bitterness tinges her tone. "At first I wasn't sure what was going on when they said to look inside the school for your guardians but then I saw your little group of losers and just *knew*."

El's eyes flutter shut so she won't have to look into the eyes of the boy that makes her feel warm and fuzzy inside who's spewing out words that *hurt* her inside.

Thirteen starts to speak again but this time it really is Mike's voice and the shock of hearing it in person—or as near to *in person* as you can get in here—pulls her eyes open. Mike, her Mike, is spitting at her. The tears that run down her cheeks are tinted red.

"Not Mike. Never Mike," Eleven murmurs.

"I'm the one that's in Mike's head now, freak," Thirteen reminds her and El can hear her pacing around her still-shaking form. The wet slaps on the ground are made by Mike's shoes, so she still hasn't changed back to her own appearance.

"Not losers," El spits, turning her head so her cheek is pressed to the ground and sucking in a harsh, rattling breath. "Friends."

"They're all so dumb." Thirteen spits onto El's cheek. "They're dumb, they're useless, they're losers—"

Eleven screams again and then a familiar papery hand's caressing her cheek.

"Eleven," her Papa says sternly.

"Papa?"

"Yes, it's your Papa," he says, trying and failing to sound comforting. It sounds so much like how he'd sounded in the school and that reminds her—

"You're dead," Eleven musters and rolls onto her back.

"No, I'm right here," Papa croons. "I'm right here and nothing's ever going to hurt you, Eleven."

"Not Eleven," El hisses.

The comical overexaggerated expressions she's so used to have made a reappearance and this time it's surprise and confusion. "You told dear Thirteen to call you Eleven," Thirteen-Papa reminds her but now, staring into the face of her demon, Eleven can't help but forget that it's Thirteen speaking to her. "You need to say what you mean, Eleven," he scolds and it's so familiar El can't help but gasp as half-suppressed memories float to the surface of her mind.

"Papa!"

The room

Never helped

Hurt hurt hurt

Blood

"Powerful, Eleven, you must—"

Slam slam slam

"Papa, help me!"

"Do it!"

Gunshots

Pop pop pop

Darkness

Frigid water

Darkness pressing on her eyelids

Choking

Freezing

Buzz

"Kill it."

"Crush it."

"Eleven—"

"This would never have happened if you had listened."

"This is your fault."

"You deserve this, Eleven."

"Don't ask questions."

Fingers pressing into her arms

Bruises

Blood on her fingertips

Power surging in her veins

"Eleven, you could hurt people if you can't control your powers."

"We're helping you, Eleven."

Light silhouetting Papa as he calls sternly, "You need to say what you mean, Eleven," and then he's shutting the door and Eleven's screeching, scratching at the walls of her cage with her fingernails before huddling in the corner of the room, weakly crying out for her Papa to please come, please help, please

And then El's surging off the ground and Thirteen's tumbling backwards, a look of shock evident on her face as her now-wet hair smacks her on the face.

"How—" Thirteen starts but Eleven's holding her down now and the anger's making it like she's not even tired from fighting Thirteen's power.

"Not weak," El says and kicks the younger girl's side. "Not stupid, not losers, not useless!" She's not even sure when she started yelling.

"Stop!" Thirteen's begging as Eleven's powers smash her and crush her. "Stop!"

"What do you really look like?" El asks. "Not Mike. Not Lilith. Not Papa. What do *you* look like?"

Thirteen's image flickers back to the golden curls.

"No," Eleven shakes her head, "Not Lilith. *You*."

"This *is* me," Thirteen retorts, but her voice has lost the confident edge she'd had when Eleven was the one on the ground.

Eleven shakes her head again. "You're their favorite?"

"Yeah, I am," Thirteen says and she would normally gloat but the inflection in the older experiment's voice makes it seem like something not to be proud of.

"But you still experimented on?"

"Yes, but—"

Eleven rips off the illusion of hair. The head underneath is completely bald, just like her own had been.

"Name is a number?"

The girl's wrist is torn off, exposing the cold, unfeeling numbers.

"Put in the room? Punished?"

Thirteen's eyes aren't blue. They're a dull, ugly green, and a line of raised flesh runs down from the bottom of her left eye to her top lip.

"Still an experiment. Just a robot. I'm not a robot," Eleven says. "Not."

The rest of the illusion is torn away and what remains is what Eleven was but different. Thin, shaking in a hospital gown, with a shaved head and numbers on her wrist.

"Never going back to Papa," Eleven says and focuses on the girl's heart.

Thirteen starts to scream as the older girl starts to squeeze and then she's swirling away as a cloud of ash, escaping, but El's still holding on with her mind and then her feet are jerked off the ground.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

The Inbetween's empty.

(Halfway there Thirteen shakes the other girl off)

When Eleven finally completely escapes the Upside Down, she doesn't realize it at first.

After months of failures—surely there must be a reason that her powers simply cannot take her out as they had done while she was in the lab; maybe it is the lack of nutrition or atmosphere pressing down on her lungs, she can't be losing her powers—Eleven has resorted to searching as Nancy and Will had for an escape. The Upside Down is similar to a creature; once it realizes a crack in its armor it makes sure to seal that crack closed.

There were no cracks for what seemed like five years. It might have been five minutes.

El is stumbling in the rotting, filthy forest, clutching the Eggos Hopper had left for her to her chest. Like magic—a miracle, though she performs miracles all the time—she could hear him, clearer than ever and his words etch themselves into two rocks. The blazing letters melt the rocks away until a scabbing, peeling sore is left and El drops the Eggos in her haste to squeeze through the hole. Somehow a man's offhand remarks to a girl he's convinced is half-dead are more powerful than the powers of the one girl who's actually physically connected to the Upside Down.

Her boys would call it ironic, she calls it lucky.

The air is still swirling around her, bitterly cold and biting into her chest like fear and small particles flying around her as well, whipping El's curls around in slimy chunks, cutting her vision into stripes, but the air she breathes in doesn't taste like poison, doesn't seem like it's trying to kill her as much as everything else is. Now as she takes a step it doesn't echo around like it had in the bad place.

El still feels grimy, though, and as she flexes her fingers they're slimy and rub against each other uncomfortably. The Eggos are on the ground where she'd left them in the place even worse than the bad place, the place Mike had called the Upside Down.

Eleven gasps as it feels like a white-hot poker is being seared into her heart. *Mike*.

El isn't sure how long it's been since she's last saw him, but the mere thought of her friend but not-friend (the explanation Mike had given Eleven after he'd pushed his mouth against hers in the school didn't clear things up, exactly, in fact, it made things more confusing) makes her heart race, palms sweat, and heart ache to see him.

"Mike, seriously—" Will starts. He's the top of the pyramid made of his friends and Mike knows he's outnumbered but he's not going down without a fight.

"Stop playing pretend!" Mike shouts. "You got lost in the woods for a week, Will!"

"Come on, Mike!" Lucas shouts, shoving Dustin away as the boy with the lisp tries to hold him back. "You can't honestly say that."

"Yes, I can!"

"Remember when it was raining and we went looking for Will and we saw a weirdo out in the woods? Remember when it was you that offered her a home and convinced us that she wasn't crazy or dangerous? Remember when you asked her to the Snow Ball? Remember when she flipped the van? Remember when she threw me off you and knocked me out to protect you? You gave her your pajamas and your basement and did her makeup and hid her from

your family! You can't—"

Mike rolls his eyes and then his features wave like the air's splitting around him before it peels away to reveal blonde curls and a sneer. "You guys really don't let up, do you?" she hisses, flexing her fingers as if releasing claws. She could if she wanted to. "Geez. I was told to find the experiment's friends, convince them that it was a hallucination or such, and then make sure she's dead. A simple project, really, and then I can go back home and not be disturbed! That's all I want," she rants. "And all of you are making it *so damn hard*. Eleven won't just freaking *die*, you won't freaking *forget*, and I had to convince Mike's mom and him that he was sick in order to try and convince you she's dead! Can't you all just *listen*?"

Will sucks in a breath. "She's alive? Where?"

Thirteen shrugs. "Hell if I know, and even if I did, I wouldn't tell you. She'll probably die within the day or at least get caught by the lab workers—I told them she was out."

"You've got two seconds to choose," Max says, raising the gun no one had noticed and releasing the safety. "Run on back to your little lab and tell them you failed or stick around and see if I won't." She gestures the slightest bit with the gun.

Thirteen pales. "I *can't* fail."

"Yes, you can," Max snarls. "It's as easy as saying, 'Hey, they wouldn't buy the bullshit that had no chance of working'."

"No, you don't understand," the younger girl, maybe only nine or ten, tries to spit but just ends up sounding like she's pleading. "I *can't*."

"Max," Lucas mutters at her side. He knows what the lab workers will do to her if she fails.

"Shut up, Lucas," Max growls. "I don't care about what'll happen to her!" (she does, or at least she doesn't want someone's death on her conscience). "If she's given this much free reign she could easily escape!"

"Max," Will says.

"Will—"

"Max!" he yells. "Everybody, listen to me!"

That stills everybody. As far as they know, Will has never raised his voice in his life.

"Max, give me the gun," Will instructs.

"But—"

"Max, I know how to use a gun," Will informs her, almost sounding... amused? "I'll be fine if she tries anything. Besides, I'm the only one here that isn't affected by her mind control."

"Why *aren't* you using your mind control, anyways?" Dustin asks, not sounding accusing, just curious. Lucas shoves him. "What the heck?"

"Just come on!"

"You saw her, didn't you?" Will asks softly. "You two fought. You're drained and scared and you don't want to be doing this anymore."

"You don't know me," Thirteen snaps weakly and tries to focus her mind on Will's. Nothing happens. "You weren't lying," she says suspiciously. "Why can't I—"

"I don't know," Will shrugs.

"You're the kid that got lost and infected," Thirteen realizes. "They want you too."

"Do you want to go back?"

"Thirteen says Eleven will be over by the north sign that says 'Welcome to Hawkins'," Will informs the group.

"Mike! Pick up!" Dustin groans.

"Hello?" a faint voice mutters.

"Mike, long story short, Eleven might be back. Get over to Mirkwood

right now!"

Far, far behind them, way out of sight, a girl wearing an illusion like a second skin steps into a truck heading to Indianapolis.

Even farther away, a girl with half of a shaved head wakes up in a cold sweat, hurriedly wiping her nose with a dark wrist painted even darker with the numbers '008'.

The girl's eyes snap open. Rumbling snores sound all around her, but that couldn't have been what woke her up. Trembling, she sits up, fine, dirty-blond hair falling over one tanned shoulder. Sweat cakes her skin and her breathing rattles in her chest.

One of her friends rolls over in her sleep when she does the inhaler, the rasping sound making her wince as well. The presence of her friends, however, does not settle her rattled nerves. Squeezing her eyes shut, she waits patiently as the dream starts to piece together in her mind. They always do.

This time, though, all she can remember is a faint sign with the word 'Indiana' on it.

Indiana? I live in New York, the girl thinks. Her dreams never take place anywhere outside the state she's currently in.

She carefully stands up, the blanket falling off of her. The light shining through her thin curtains illuminates the pale feet almost flying across the floor until she reaches the bathroom, shuts and locks the door to sink to the ground, trying to keep her dinner in her stomach.

Panicked breaths echo around the small porcelain room and it takes her a while to realize that they are her own.

She takes her inhaler again.

When she is sure she will be able to keep her dinner in, she totters to her feet to place two hands on her sink and stare at her reflection. Her tanned skin and blond hair make her look like the stereotypical outdoorsy-kinda girl. The girl pokes her cheek. Still alive, she

supposes.

She hasn't dreamt in a long time—five years, to be exact. And now, at nineteen years old, she is not happy that they're appearing again.

There is pounding at the door and she jumps a mile into the air, pressing her hand to her heart.

"Nic?"

"Yeah?" she calls back, recognizing her friend Calla's voice.

"You good?"

"Fine," Nicole swallows. "Just... got my period." The lie tastes bitter on her tongue.

"Kay." Calla seems to accept this as an answer. Hours or maybe minutes or even maybe seconds later, when Nicole sticks her head out of the bathroom, Calla is snoring on the ground again.

Nicole presses a hand to her forehead and winces. Damn it, but she can't help but close her eyes in pain.

Three wrists flash in front of her eyes: '011', '013', and '008'

Well.

Nicole surveys the life she had built for herself. The fake life.

Resisting the urge to vomit, she lays back down on the ground. One more night's sleep. After that, she'll be faking her own death again.

After all...

The future is always set in stone.

She rolls over and pulls the sleeve over her wrist even further.

The numbers '001' are hidden.

9. The Escapee

A/N: Hey so I don't normally do A/N's anymore but would you guys please head out to my profile to check out the poll?

Steve's pulling up to the Wheeler's house to surprise Nancy with roses and a mixtape when her little brother comes tearing out of the house screaming bloody murder with his parents on his heels.

"Get back here!" his dad bellows as his mom yells, "Michael!"

"Go go go go go!" Mike screams, bodyslamming Steve back into his truck and trampling his roses into the ground. Thank god the mixtape is in his pocket.

"What?" Steve yells back but he still slams on the gas, splattering the two parents with gravel. After an... incident with one of his previous girlfriends, Steve has been conditioned to get out of the way of screaming parents even if there's no reason Nancy's parents would be mad at him.

"That man is *grounded*," Ted proclaims as Karen bends down to pick up the bouquet. The flowers are mostly crushed but miraculously, the tag attached is only slightly dirty. Karen brushes it off. It reads 'To Nancy, With Love From Steve' in fancy, albeit shaky, handwriting. As corny as the present most likely is, Karen knows Nancy will love it.

Karen looks around and realizes Holly's standing at her side but Ted's gone back into the house.

"Come on, let's go," she murmurs to the wide-eyed toddler, casting a furtive look over her shoulder. The Will Byers incident of last year has kept all well-meaning parents on edge and if Karen had any ounce of control over her teens she would keep them inside.

"What was all that noise?" Nancy inquires from the doorway, looking scandalized.

"Your brother kidnapped your boyfriend," Karen replies, scooping

Holly up. "He was bringing you these." She hands the flowers to her older daughter, who smiles a bit despite herself. "You know, you really should cut your hair," Karen suggests, twisting one lock around her finger before letting it bounce back. "I've heard it's all the fashion."

"Yeah, in your porno novels?" Nancy retorts.

"Nancy!"

"Porno?" Holly repeats.

"It's nothing, honey," Karen soothes, shooing her back inside before standing back up to scowl at her oldest daughter. "You know, Nancy, I'm trying to make an effort with you but you've been nothing but snappy with me since that week Will went missing."

Nancy bristles and prepares to fire back but then seems to deflate when Karen lays a hand on her arm.

"You know you can always tell me anything, right?"

That wasn't the punishment Nancy had been expecting and before she can think up another response her mother escapes the cool night air.

"Time for bed, Holly!"

Chewing on her lip, Nancy ponders why Mike would kidnap her boyfriend. Is *stuff* happening again? Do they need her?

"Nancy, please shut the door," Karen calls. "It's letting in all the cold air! And would you mind reading to Holly?" No response. "Nancy? Would you please shut the door?"

What sounds like a hurricane thunders up the stairs, pushing Karen roughly out of the way. "Nancy, what on earth—"

Her door slams and something thumps to the ground. Karen's barely stomped up to it before it swings open, Nancy now in baggy grey sweatpants and a matching grey sweatshirt. Nancy's pulling her hair into a ponytail one-handed as she darts into Mike's room and chestplants onto his bed, free hand scrabbling for his SuperComm.

Karen is once again slammed to the side as Nancy thunders down the stairs, her hair halfway falling out of the tie.

"Nancy?" Holly calls from her room. "Story?"

"Just a second, Holly," Karen commands but then their front door is finally shut—right in front of her face.

Karen strides out the door just in time to see their car peeling out of the driveway.

"Nancy!"

"Where do you want to go?" Steve shouts over Mike's incessant but unintelligible commands. The brunette briefly wonders how the ravenette can even see at this point, considering his curls are all over the place—his eyes, mouth, everywhere, it seems, except on the back of his head where it *should* be.

"Mirkwood!"

"What the hell is Mirkwood?" Steve panics. He's never heard of a street called Mirkwood before. Maybe the kid's gone insane! That's it. He's stuck in a car with a crazy person!

"It's from Lord of the Rings," Mike explains. "It's by the—where are we right now?"

Steve squints at the nearest street sign and reads it out to Mike.

"I don't know where that is! Wait—turn! Turn! Fuck! You missed it!"

"I need a motherfucking heads-up next time, dipshit!" Steve exclaims, twisting the wheel around so hard he nearly wrenches it off the dash. They probably could have made the sharp turn if the other pair of lights had not suddenly appeared and the kid grabbed onto the steering wheel and wrenches it back again, sending the front wheels up into the air.

"Whoa!" Mike screams, grabbing onto Steve's arm and his own armrest. "This is fucking amazing!"

"It is not!" Steve yells back, desperately trying to make the car tilt forwards and not backwards. He really doesn't want to be crushed at the moment. "Don't spring stuff like that on me, shithead!"

The car suddenly decides it wants to do its best impression of a drunk college freshman and its wheels hit the ground with a sickening *crunch*. Apparently the car didn't think that was serious enough of a crunch, though, because the airbags don't deploy and the kid's head hits the dash with a *crunch* just as, if even more so, sickening as the sound of the gears grinding as the car struggles to continue forwards —right at the other car.

Panic sinks its icy claws deep inside Steve's chest when the boy doesn't move.

"Kid?" He grabs the kid's shoulder and pulls him up, revealing the black eye but more importantly the crushed nose and resulting bloodflow. "Mike?"

Both cars screech to a halt.

"Hey, does anyone want to tell me why my brother just kidnapped my boyfriend?" Nancy asks calmly, her knuckles white with tension on the steering wheel.

"Huh?" Dustin crackles through the Comm.

"Would you care to inform me as to why my brother just kidnapped my boyfriend?" Nancy repeats, eyes narrowing. They really need to get some lights out here. "Where are you guys all meeting up, anyway? Will's house?"

"Go to Mirk—" is all Dustin starts instructing before blinding white lights suddenly loom out of nowhere, piercing screams echoing out of the death trap. The car skids on two wheels for at least three seconds before crashing down on all fours, thankfully, but unthankfully, it's heading straight for Nancy.

The gears crunch together uncomfortably as she scrambles to get out of the way by peeling forwards as fast as she can.

Her tires squeal as she comes to a halt and watches with horror as the other car halts too, but its momentum causes it to tilt, this time onto its front wheels before finally settling.

Nancy slams her car door so hard the glass door is in danger of shattering. "Um, what the hell?" she demands, stomping over to the more battered car. "You were going in the complete opposite direction! You could have killed us both! I could—"

"Babe, I love you, but now is not the time," the driver interrupts.

'Babe'?

Nancy peers inside the car to see a shirtless Steve and her little brother with blood all over his face.

"Mike! Oh my God!" She's furious, pissed, *beyond* angry. Still, as she wrestles her brother out of the car, Steve's shirt clamped firmly on his nose, she can't keep her simmering temper up for long. "Is it broken? Are you still bleeding? Can you talk? What the hell is going on?" Nancy pulls Mike into a fierce hug, disregarding the blood stains that are inevitably going to be left on her shirt.

"M goob," Mike answers and he sounds like his nose is clogged—*of course it is*, Nancy thinks scathingly, *with blood*. "M grabe, eben! I batch El!"

"Tilt your head back, head wounds bleed a lot, pinch it closed, don't let it run into your mouth, I need to have a talk with your chaffeur," she says in one breath and whirls and lays into her cowering boyfriend. "How could you not pay *attention* to the *road* when you're *driving*, Steve Herrington? Especially when my brother's in the car! I cannot *believe* you! Nothing can be so important you have to risk both of your lives, nothing, you hear me? Nothing!"

"I mabe hib," Mike interjects with a wince.

Steve cowers with his hands up in the universal *don't shoot* gesture. "I have no clue what's going on, Nance. The kid's like a fucking whirlwind, shoved me back into my car and started hollering his head off to 'go, go, go'!"

"I grabbeb 'e wheel," Mike offers, glancing at the couple with his good eye.

"You didn't, kid," Steve shoots him down shortly, "this is all my fault. I'm really sorry, guys. The kid was panicking and I guess I panicked a little bit too."

"I *bib* grab 'e wheel!" Mike insists.

Nance shakes her head and pulls her two boys into a bone-crushing hug.

"Ow," Mike whines, shooting her a look when her shoulder jostles his nose.

"Oh shit, how are we gonna explain this to Mom?" Nancy's hands fly up to her cheeks.

"Boesn't mabber," Mike almost shouts. "Back to 'e bar, bet to 'irkbood!"

"'irkbood'?"

"He was shouting something about Mirkwood," Steve shrugs.

"Yeah, 'irkbood!" Mike nods his head frantically. "Bow!"

Then they're all piling into the car Nancy was driving, her still asking what the hell 'Mirkwood' is, mostly because it's less beaten up by its ordeal than Steve's. Mike somehow ends up on Nancy's lap as she drives.

"Bere," he instructs, pointing in the direction they need to go. Now that Nancy concentrates, she can see a small cluster of faint lights near the road.

"Holy shit, what happened to your nose?" Lucas demands when the car pulls up, skidding.

"Oh God," Max gasps but that doesn't stop her from shining her flashlight directly in Mike's bloody face.

"Birst, by boo we have to beet bere?"

"We all biked over here from Dustin's house to meet you here and then go to my house where Hop's going to be bring her," Will says quietly. "That metal screeching a minute ago—did you guys get in a car accident or something?"

"Hey, Joyce," Karen says into the receiver after finally tucking Holly in for the night.

"Hey, Karen," Joyce responds, sounding frazzled.

"I was just wondering if Mike and Nancy are at your house? They ran off without telling me where they were going."

"Oh, yeah, they're here," Joyce fibs, glancing around her empty house, keys clutched tight in her white-knuckled fist. "They didn't tell you? The boys've been planning this sleepover for weeks and Nancy and Jonathan are going to be supervising while I go on a date with Hop."

"Really?" Karen squeals, clapping her hands together. "I've been telling you for ages that you guys would look *so cute* together and he really needs someone to help him get his life back on track—"

"I know, Karen, and thank you so much for the support, but Hop's outside, so I've gotta run!"

"Oh, of course!" Karen exclaims. "Don't let me hold you back!"

Thank God Hop told her about the situation before Mike's mom called.

Just a few moments later, two cars pull up to a screeching halt in Joyce's driveway and the boys plus Max plus Nancy plus Steve all tumble out.

"Bib he finb ber yeb?" Mike immediately demands.

"What happened to your face, honey?" Joyce gasps. "Oh God, let's get you cleaned up!"

"I'll bake bat as a 'bo'," he mutters, disappointed. Lucas claps him on the back as he follows Joyce dejectedly to the bathroom.

"What did he even say?" Max murmurs to Lucas.

"He said, 'Did he find her yet?' and I'll take that as a 'no,'" Dustin translates. "You know, you'd think you guys would be able to make that out, considering you've been able to hear what I've been saying for years."

"That's different," Lucas tells him, his hand grazing Max's. "You have a lisp, he's—"

—got a frog in his throat," Max finishes for him.

The girl panics when the faint roar of a car reaches her ears. Even though it's highly unlikely the bad men are coming for her, that doesn't stop the fear gripping her chest with icy fingers, stroking her spine with its soft caress, and whispering in her ear that Papa's coming for her and she won't even have seen Mike one last time.

"Eleven?" The car stops close to where she's crouching in a bush, petrified. The voice doesn't sound like Papa. "Eleven, it's me! It's Hopper!"

Hopper. Eleven racks her brains for that name and comes up with the image of a man with a frown but a warm shirt that he gave her before helping Mrs. Byers find her son. Eleven likes Mrs. Byers and Mrs. Byers likes Hopper so that means Eleven likes Hopper even if frowns are bad.

"Eleven, I have Eggos!"

Eggos? Eggos taste good. Eggos taste like home. Eggos might help the horrible feeling in her stomach that's a roiling, clenching hurt.

Slowly, haltingly, Eleven crawls out of the bush and steps into the frowning man's circle of light.

"Hey, El," Hopper says quietly, approaching with soft and small footsteps. "El, do you want to go home?"

Home.

Does he mean home as in Mike's house? She had to hide in his house but it was home because Mike was there.

Or does he mean *his* home? Eleven's never been there but that would make sense because he's saying it.

Or does he even mean Mrs. Byer's house? That house was more welcoming than Mike's had been but Mike isn't there so Eleven isn't sure she wants to go there. She doesn't even hardly know Will's older brother or Will himself.

"Mike?" she just asks instead. It doesn't matter where she is as long as Mike's there. And Eggos.

Hopper chuckles. "Yeah, Mike's at Will's house right now. But, if we want to get there, you have to get in my car."

Car.

The bad men drove cars.

Eleven shakes her head, shrinking away from the circle of light.

"Hey," Hopper mutters. "Hey, I'm not one of the workers, all right? I'm with Mike. I'm going to help you."

Eleven stands firmly even though her legs are shaking both from the cold and from standing and crouching for so long.

"My car is really warm," Hopper coaxes. "And the Eggos are in there."

Warm. Eggos.

Bad men.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Hopper says. "Promise."

It's that word, mostly, that convinces her to sit inside the car with the frowning man (he doesn't know that 'promise' has become sort of a code for Mike and El but thank goodness he used it).

"Everyone's at Will's," Hopper says off-handedly. "Do you want to head over there or...?" He looks over at the little girl, who shakes her head. "Too many people?" he guesses.

She nods.

"We can head over to my place," he offers. "We can get you cleaned up and in some warmer clothes and then we can head over to the Byers'."

For a long, long time the trembling girl just looks out in front of her before slowly nodding her head up and down. She turns to look Hopper straight in the eyes and hers are so big he can see his own reflection in them.

"You're gonna be fine," Hopper vows even though he knows he can't really say that. "Promise."